Axial Civilizations and World History

Edited by Johann P. Arnason, S.N. Eisenstadt and Björn Wittrock

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Axial Civilizations and World History

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Johann P. Arnason, S.N. Eisenstadt,
and Björn Wittrock

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GENERAL INTRODUCTION

JOHANN P. ARNASON, S.N. EISENSTADT AND
BJÖRN WITTROCK

Axial or Axial Age civilizations (as we shall see, the two variants have different connotations) have been central to a broader debate on civilizational themes and problems during the last two decades. The growing interest in civilizations and ways of comparing them can, in more general terms, be seen as an integral part of the "historical turn" that has opened up new horizons of social inquiry. In that context, new approaches to the Axial Age exemplify a more widespread effort to translate ideas inherited from the philosophy of history into the language of historical sociology. The notion of an Axial Age—a period of radical cultural transformations in several major civilizational centres, unfolding during four or five centuries around the middle of the last millennium BCE—can probably be traced back to the eighteenth century. The much more recent attempt to link this vision of a formative past to sociological perspectives gave rise to a discussion documented in important texts.[1] Although the conferences and publications of the 1980s did much to clarify key issues, many central questions remained open; at the same time, further historical research on the cultures and traditions involved in Axial Age transformations has thrown light on previously unexplored aspects.

A new round of discussion took place at a conference in Florence in December 2001, organized under the joint auspices of the European University Institute, the Israel Academy of Sciences and Humanities, and the Swedish Collegium for Advanced Study in the Social Sciences. Most of the contributions to this volume were first presented there.

[1] See Eisenstadt (1986, 1987 and 1992).

Basic Assumptions and Open Questions

To situate the debate reopened in Florence and reflected in the final versions of the texts published below, a brief outline of the background is in order. The historical-sociological reinterpretation of the Axial Age, as formulated—above all—in the work of S. N. Eisenstadt, centres on radical changes to cultural patterns and their relationship to the structures of social power. Eisenstadt's analysis of these transformations begins with a point best formulated in negative terms: The civilizations in question experience a comprehensive rupture and problematization of order. They respond to this challenge by elaborating new models of order, based on contrasts and connections between transcendental foundations and mundane lifeworlds. The common constitutive features of Axial Age world-views might be summed up in the following terms: They involve a *broadening of horizons,* or an opening up of potentially universal perspectives, in contrast to the particularism of more archaic modes of thought; an *ontological distinction* between higher and lower levels of reality; and a *normative subordination* of the lower level to the higher, with more or less overtly stated implications for human efforts to translate guiding principles into ongoing practices. All these innovations may be seen as signs of enhanced reflexivity, but the reflexive potential is channelled into specific contexts and directions.

The cultural mutations of the Axial Age generated a surplus of meaning, open to conflicting interpretations and capable of creative adaptation to new situations. But the long-term consequences can only be understood in light of the interaction between cultural orientations and the dynamics of social power. The new horizons of meaning could serve to justify or transfigure, but also to question and contest existing institutions. They were, in other words, invoked to articulate legitimacy as well as protest. More specific versions of both alternatives emerged in conjunction with the social distribution, accumulation and regulation of power. In that sense, the history of ideological politics can be traced back to the Axial Age. The dynamic of ideological formations led to the crystallization of orthodoxy and heterodoxy, more pronounced and polarizing in some traditions than others. But this development of new cultural determinants should not be seen as evidence for more thoroughgoing cultural determinism; rather, the complex interplay of patterns and

processes is conducive to more autonomous action by a broader spectrum of social actors and forces.

The defining characteristics of the Axial Age are, in this view, common to otherwise different and separate cultural traditions. Basic intellectual innovations of the kind outlined above occurred in the context of Jewish monotheism and Greek philosophical thought, as well as within the Chinese tradition of elaborations on the theme of socio-cosmic order and in the Indian religions which envisioned salvation through a radical rejection of the world. The case of ancient Iranian religion is more controversial. Axial "breakthroughs" did not take place in the oldest civilizational centres of the Near East, although interaction with them was crucial to developments in ancient Greece and ancient Israel. As for later transformations, some uncertainty about their status may be noted: Christianity and Islam have sometimes been treated as late products of the Axial Age, but sometimes as "secondary breakthroughs", post-axial formations drawing on a reinterpreted axial legacy. These divergent views highlight a problem implicit in the analytical model outlined above. In one sense, the Axial Age is a historical period with more or less clearly demarcated chronological boundaries—allowing for some variation across the civilizational spectrum—and a cluster of defining features. From another point of view, the structural aspects supposedly common to cultural breakthroughs of the Axial Age would seem to distinguish one type of civilization from others, and examples of this type might emerge in different historical settings, not only those of the original Axial Age. It might, in other words, be appropriate to speak of axial civilizations as a general category with an open-ended historical field of application, rather than civilizations of the Axial Age. As will be seen, this distinction between historical and typological perspectives is still a matter of debate.

As a result of the discussions in Florence, four main themes may be emphasized as central to further work and indicative of necessary corrections to the existing model. First, growing insight into the complexity and historicity of pre-axial civilizations—primarily those of the ancient Near East—is bound to raise new questions about the specific contributions of the Axial Age: the innovations should not be mistaken for abrupt breaks with stagnant or undifferentiated traditions. More is now known about cultural transformations which preceded the Axial Age and prefigured some of its supposedly distinctive achievements. At the same time, a better understanding of

the reflexive and innovative capacities of archaic civilizations calls for examination of the intellectual as well as institutional obstacles that limited their impact. Second, a stronger emphasis should be placed on the diversity of developments in different regions during the Axial Age, and of the resultant traditions; more comparative analysis is needed, and the idea of a shared problematic of order, common to Greek, Jewish, Indian and Chinese traditions, may have to be relativized or reformulated; the interpretation of the Axial Age might have to move towards a model of "multiple axialities" (analogous to the emerging paradigm of "multiple modernities"). Third, there is more to be said on the links between cultural innovations and the changing constellations of power. Comparative analyses of this aspect have tended to focus on the roles and mutual relations of new intellectual and political elites; less notice has been taken of the patterns of state formation that took shape during the period in question. They varied significantly from case to case, and closer study of their respective dynamics, as well as of their interaction with new modes of thought and interpretation, would help to clarify the contexts of axial transformations or trajectories. In this regard, the problematic of imperial projects and structures is particularly important: the connection between axial breakthroughs and "ecumenic empires" has often been noted, but this insight has yet to be translated into detailed comparative history. Finally, it seems advisable to abandon the concept of a "secondary breakthrough", without losing sight of the problems which it was meant to tackle. The *longue durée* of Eurasian civilizations is marked by successive adaptations and reinterpretations of axial legacies; more comparative analysis of such processes is needed, but it should not begin by labeling post-axial developments as secondary. That term obscures the originality of the transformations in question (such as those of late antiquity in the Mediterranean world, including the triumph and expansion of two universal monotheistic religions). It would be more useful to construct a framework for comparing the Axial Age with later phases of formative change.

Further reflections on a research agenda can be found in S. N. Eisenstadt's concluding statement. He stresses the need for a more differentiated and contextualized analysis of the relations between axial civilizations, non-axial civilizations and world history. Instead of assuming that the crystallization of axial civilizations coincides with the emergence of a distinct, more or less uniform worldwide—or at

least Eurasian—Axial Age, it seems better to conceive of the axial syndrome as a crucially important component in the history of human societies, which develops in different ways in different contexts, giving rise to different, multiple axialities which interact continually among themselves and with non-axial civilizations in the shaping of different patterns of world history or histories. All these considerations call for a more differentiated approach to the relations between civilizational constellations and world histories, and a rethinking of the relationship between sociological theory and comparative historical analysis.

Broader Contexts and Ongoing Debates

The debate on the Axial Age is linked to a wide range of issues in historical sociology. On the one hand, the idea of axiality—as a distinctive civilizational pattern, subject to variations in specific settings—can serve to exemplify more general theoretical perspectives; on the other hand, references to themes and questions discussed in other contexts may highlight underdeveloped or problematic aspects of the ideas summarized above. Most obviously, the axial model—to use a convenient shorthand label—is central to the more general revival of interest in the comparative analysis of civilizations. So far, there is no comparable attempt to theorize contrasts and parallels between civilizational frameworks of change. Moreover, the axial model approaches this task in a way that helps to avoid some traditional pitfalls of civilizational theory: it distinguishes between civilizational complexes without mistaking them for mutually closed worlds or prejudging the question of internal unity. The emphasis on inbuilt tensions, permanent problems and conflicting interpretations is, by the same token, an antidote to over-integrated models.

It should also be noted that the search for cross-civilizational parallels is not bound to an evolutionary frame of reference. The trends highlighted by the axial model are macro-historical, and in that regard, it brings a new perspective to the historical-sociological analysis of long-term processes: the complex and contested logic of cultural orientations combines with the more familiar dynamic of power structures. This line of inquiry is, however, not based on an evolutionary paradigm. Some theorists of socio-cultural evolution have occasionally drawn on—or at least taken note of—the axial model for their own purposes. Robert Bellah's theory of religious

evolution refers to Voegelin's work and describes the breakthrough from archaic to historic religions in terms that bear some resemblance to the axial model ("the historic religions are all in some sense transcendental").[2] A more explicit reference can be found in Jürgen Habermas's culturalist reconstruction of historical materialism.[3] But the model as such has no evolutionary implications.

The axial model also has a direct and decisive bearing on recent developments in the theory of modernity. It helps to substantiate the claim—often put forward in an intuitive or impressionistic fashion—that modernity depends on premodern traditions for its self-thematization and self-understanding. More precisely, the debate on "multiple modernities" has drawn attention to the role of civilizational legacies in shaping the institutional and interpretive patterns of modernity, and closer analysis of such long-term continuities is bound to raise the question of axial sources. Traditions of direct or indirect axial origin enter into the making of modernity, but their relationship to other factors varies from case to case, and comparative history is only beginning to explore the field. The relative weight of "great traditions" and heterodox currents is also a matter of debate, not least in regard to the European transformation, undeniably the most momentous of its kind (the question of "sectarian origins of modernity" is discussed in some recent writings by S.N. Eisenstadt).

The heritage of classical sociology can be reassessed in light of these emerging issues. In particular, the axial model draws on Max Weber's insights but avoids his one-sided emphasis on specific religious traditions and the correspondingly dismissive treatment of others. The "religious rejection of the world", central to Weber's typology of civilizations and—as he saw it—most significant when translated into innerworldly activism, now appears as one case among others within a broader spectrum of transformative orientations. The difference is perhaps most obvious in relation to the Chinese world: Weber's interpretation of the Chinese tradition—a sustained attempt to minimize its inner conflicts and therefore its transformative potential—is replaced with an analysis of specific variations on the general axial pattern outlined above. But the Chinese civilizational complex, more fundamentally foreign to Western interpreters than

[2] Bellah (1991), 32 (the text was first published in 1964).

[3] Habermas (1976), 241-42 (with explicit reference to Jaspers and his conception of the Axial Age).

the other major Eurasian traditions, also exemplifies the problems that arise at a metatheoretical level. It is one thing to posit a transcultural framework for comparison, another (and a much more difficult one) to articulate it in more balanced terms. If the existing version of the axial model still reflects a tendency to homogenize different historical worlds, the categories used to that effect can only be derived from a selective version of the Western background (that applies most obviously to the emphatic distinction between transcendental and mundane realities, discussed and criticized in several contributions to this book). The linguistic, cultural and historical distance between Western and Chinese ways of worldmaking—to borrow a philosophical term coined for other purposes—is one of the most significant challenges that confront comparative history.

Last but not least, the axial model takes up a theme which Durkheim adumbrated at the end of his classic work on the sociology of religion: there is no more striking manifestation of social creativity than the epoch-making innovations that gave rise to enduring civilizational identities as well as to religious visions of universal community. From this point of view, the evolving debate on the Axial Age links up with other attempts to theorize the creative aspect of socio-cultural life, and to lay the foundations for a radical critique of functionalist and evolutionist paradigms.

Alternative Approaches

As we have tried to show, there are two sides to the axial problematic. It centres on the interpretation of a historical period, characterized by cross-civilizational parallels which seem to go far beyond any traceable contacts. But the historical analysis uses general concepts and combines them into a model that transcends specific contexts. There is, in other words, an unresolved tension between historical and theoretical levels of the argument. Three ways of dealing with this problem may be suggested; all of them were to some extent represented at the conference in Florence. But although some of the following papers are closer to one option than others, it would be premature to identify the three positions with particular authors.

The first approach focuses on *axial civilizations* as a distinctive type, and on the interconnected defining characteristics which set them apart from other civilizational formations. In other words: it stresses structural rather than historical aspects. The debate is, in this view,

less about an Axial Age than about an axial paradigm of civilizational dynamics which may emerge in otherwise different historical circumstances and at different historical junctures (there is, for example, no difficulty in interpreting the emergence of Islam as the formation of a new axial civilization). The basic features first identified in the context of the Axial Age can then be redefined in a typological sense. A high level of institutionalized reflexivity is linked to cosmological visions which distinguish between ultimate and derivative reality (or between transcendental and mundane dimensions, to use a more controversial formulation). The resultant models of order generate new problems (linked, in the last instance, to the task of bridging the gap between the postulated levels of reality); they can be solved in different ways, each of which generates further problems; the main axial civilizational complexes exemplify both the alternative solutions and the re-problematizing consequences. The relationship between axial cultural horizons and the structures of social power is profoundly ambiguous. New and more elaborate patterns of legitimation are counterbalanced by new possibilities of articulating dissent and protest. Elites and coalitions, whose composition varies from one axial case to another, act as "carriers" of the axial paradigm.

In short, the typological thesis claims that specific patterns of reflexivity, world-interpretation, legitimation and contestation set a certain group of civilizations (identified with enduring traditions and more or less extended families of societies) apart from others. To date, the most systematic use made of this model was—somewhat paradoxically—geared to the analysis of a non-axial formation: Eisenstadt's work on Japanese civilization, where the Japanese case is compared to the major Eurasian traditions and socio-cultural complexes. The next task would then be a more detailed comparative study of the axial civilizations as such—likely to lead to further conceptual differentiations within the existing framework.

The second approach stresses cultural (and in the upshot social) *transformations* of a specific kind, without making the more far-reaching claim that they translate into comprehensive civilizational patterns. "Axial breakthroughs" could be understood as shifts to higher levels of reflexivity, with particular emphasis on clearer awareness of human agency, historicity and responsibility. Such transmutations can occur in contexts and circumstances different from those of the original Axial Age, and the results are correspondingly diverse.

Although there is no necessary connection with evolutionary theory *stricto sensu*, this view is less history-laden than the typological one and more easily adaptable to narratives of progress.

Some further implications should be noted. The primary focus of comparative analysis would now be on other world-historical transformations, rather than on civilizational complexes as such. Here the axial problematic is of twofold relevance; the analysis of axial transformations can throw light on the ultimate sources and long-term prehistory of modernity, but it can also serve to put modernizing processes in perspective by comparing them with other world-historical mutations. The field of comparative inquiry should, however, not be restricted to axiality and modernity. Among other cases to be considered, historians of Eurasian civilizations have often singled out the first two or three centuries of the second millennium CE (the strongest claims have been made with regard to China and Western Europe), but the question of common or interconnected cross-regional patterns has hardly been raised. A workshop organized under the auspices of the same institutions in Uppsala in June 2003 dealt with this problem; the papers presented there will be published in the near future.

Closer analysis of axial transformations may lead to a clearer distinction between general and contextual aspects. The innovations and reorientations listed by Jaspers (and in more or less modified versions by other writers on the same subject) are of two kinds: the discovery or upgrading of reflexivity, historicity and agentiality represent the more general side of axial transformations, whereas some other features commonly mentioned in the same connection are primarily contextual—e.g. the cosmological patterns or the textual articulations. But then there are obvious parallels with other cases: enhanced reflexivity, historicity and agentiality are recurrent traits of historical transformations, and more can be done to spell out their trans-cultural logic.

Finally, the distinction between a highly abstract logic of transformation and a variety of concrete settings raises a further question: can the civilizations that grew out of Axial Age transformations also be seen as ways of circumscribing the reflexivity, historicity and agentiality that had been released during phases of innovation? The better-known experience of modernity suggests that this side of societal consolidation should not be overlooked, and the codification of religious traditions can plausibly be interpreted in the same vein.

The third approach would, in a sense, bring history back in. Reflexivity is always contextual: its specific meanings and directions depend on underlying cultural orientations and world perspectives. Further reflection on this point raises the question of *axial constellations*, i.e. the historical settings of the changes that seem to mark the Axial Age as a crucial phase of world history. If (as suggested above) the most seminal interpretations of the period have erred on the side of uniformity across civilizational boundaries, more detailed comparative studies are needed to redress the balance. On that basis, it might be easier to distinguish between particular dynamics and universal potentials of axial transformations, and to answer the question whether they result in the constitution of a shared civilizational type (the capacity to translate into comprehensive and durable patterns is not necessarily equal in all cases). The task is, in other words, to continue and equilibrate an unfinished project of comparative history, rather than to abandon it and opt for a new frame of reference.

This line of argument would have to be backed up by more extensive analyses of the less well known cases in point. While some shortcomings of the historical evidence may be irremediable, it is also true that much more can be done to bring the Indian and Chinese worlds into comparative focus. They have for obvious reasons been less central to Western visions of global history—including those of the Axial Age—than the more familiar sources of European traditions. But this empirical imbalance cannot be overcome without critical reflection on concepts and presuppositions. A closer look at key interpretations of the Axial Age—especially the models proposed by Jaspers and Eisenstadt—will inevitably raise questions about their dependence on assumptions grounded in Greek and Jewish versions of axiality, as well as in later combinations of the two former legacies. In particular, the distinction between the transcendental and the mundane is related to this background and not self-evidently applicable in other civilizational contexts.

In short, the third position stresses the need to contextualize axial transformations, to compare their varying imprints on different civilizational complexes, and to correct a *Vorverständnis* derived from one-sidedly Eurocentric interpretations of axial sources. This might amount to a controlled "deconstruction" of the existing axial model; the result would be a more diversified conception of global history, with ramifications that can only emerge from further research. But

if the idea of the Axial Age is to be put to the test of comparative history, affinities and contrasts with other turning-points or formative phases are also relevant to our questions. To outline the more long-term perspective that such a line of analysis would require (and to specify questions foreshadowed in the first section), we may begin with a brief reference to Jan Assmann's critique of traditional conceptions of the Axial Age. As he sees it, the illusion of a "mysterious synchrony" disappears if we admit that innovations comparable to those of the Axial Age occurred at earlier as well as later dates: the narrative could begin with Akhenaten (initiator of the most radical but also most spectacularly unsuccessful monotheistic revolution ever attempted) and end with Muhammad. Assmann's conclusion is that we are not dealing with an epochal threshold (*Epochenschwelle)*, but with a cultural transformation, and that chronology is external to it.[4]

It can, however, be argued that an extension of the chronological frame of reference would not simply lead to a longer version of the same story line. Rather, we could distinguish three successive phases of historical transformations. On the one hand, the Axial Age was the outcome of more long-term processes, and to some extent prefigured by earlier developments; it seems likely that there were more precursors than we now know—given the limited and selective character of cultural memory, some of them must have been forgotten (the Akhenaten episode would be unknown if archeologists had not rediscovered it; and as for another case, we may have to admit that we simply do not know whether Zoroaster belongs to the Axial Age or to its prehistory). To speak of precursors is not to imply any teleological or evolutionary connections: seen from the vantage-point of the Axial Age, the phenomena in question appear as referential to later and more conclusive developments, but we need not postulate an evolutionary logic leading from the earlier to the later phase, and the affinities observable *ex post* do not prejudge the question of different contextual meanings. Further progress towards better understanding of early civilizations might throw more light on their internal changes, and thus provide a basis for less unilateral comparisons. Assmann's work on ancient Egypt is the most ambitious and instructive project of its kind, but there is no doubt that further

[4] Assmann (2000), 290-92.

work on Mesopotamian civilization and its peripheries will affect our overall view of ancient history.

On the other hand, a cluster of later transformations should be set apart from those of the Axial Age and at the same time drawn more systematically into the comparative context. The emergence of Islam was the last episode of a wave which included the Christianization of the Roman Empire, the formation and diffusion of Manichaeism, and the Sassanian systematization of Zoroastrianism. It is tempting to draw a further parallel with the roughly contemporaneous crystallization and diffusion of Mahayana Buddhism in southern and eastern parts of the Eurasian macro-region. But if we limit our survey to the more obviously interconnected developments in western Eurasia, the religious mutations must be seen as integral and essential aspects of late antiquity, related to the imperial restructurings, geopolitical shifts and social transformations which set this period apart from earlier and later ones. Late antiquity is now increasingly recognized as a distinctive epoch and a particularly promising topic for comparative history; it should be included among the prime cases of plausible comparability with the Axial Age.

The present collection reflects the general trends and focal points of the discussion, as outlined in the above. The starting-point must be a reconsideration of the cases closest at hand for earlier interpreters of the Axial Age, but these paradigmatic examples—the Greek and Jewish sources of Western traditions—should be set against the ancient Near Eastern background. A second group of papers deals with the universal religions of late antiquity, with a view to clarifying their interrelationships with axial legacies as well as the significance of their doctrinal and institutional innovations. Finally, the analyses of Indian and Chinese traditions in the last section link up with earlier debates on the axial phases and aspects of these two civilizational complexes, but also with more recent work on their long-term trajectories. Introductory remarks on individual phases can be found at the beginning of each section.

PART ONE

THEORETICAL APPROACHES

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INTRODUCTION: HISTORY, THEORY AND INTERPRETATION

JOHANN P. ARNASON, S.N. EISENSTADT AND BJÖRN WITTROCK

A survey of approaches to the axial problematic should begin with reflections on its conceptual frame of reference, its background in intellectual history and its links to broader theoretical contexts. The genealogy of the notion of an Axial Age has yet to be traced in detail, and it may include some surprising links; related ideas have not always been expressed in the same terms. The most important turning-point in this complex history was the translation of ideas developed in the philosophy of history into the language of historical sociology. If Jaspers's brief but suggestive sketch and Voegelin's much more systematic work belong to, or are affiliated with, the former genre, Eisenstadt's analyses fall within the second and are closely linked to some of its main concerns. The transition did not relegate the earlier phase to prehistory: questions grounded—explicitly or implicitly—in philosophical perspectives on history are still related to the sociological themes that have become more central to the discussion. Moreover, the two lines of discourse may seem less distinct if their cultural and historical settings are considered. On both levels, interpretations of the Axial Age have mirrored changing perceptions of the relationship between Western modernity, its traditional sources and its world-historical Others. This connection is most apparent when it finds expression in speculative projects, but it is also reflected in ambitious sociological theorizing.

The papers in the first section deal with various aspects of this problematic; they emphasize the need to combine theoretical debate with conceptual history, and hermeneutical reflection on development of the problematic to changing views of its central problems. Johann P. Arnason discusses successive approaches to the Axial Age and analyzes, in detail, the interpretations put forward by Karl Jaspers and S.N. Eisenstadt. The changes to ideas and perspectives do

not form a narrative of linear progress; the very idea of the Axial Age is still eminently contested, and the current debate can benefit from reconsiderations of past arguments and their unanswered accompanying questions. Jaspers's account of the Axial Age is embedded in a comprehensive philosophy of history whose premises and ambitions now seem thoroughly outdated in many respects, yet closer examination reveals links to themes and issues that remain highly relevant within the framework of historical sociology. Eisenstadt's work represents the most decisive step in that direction; there are, however, two sides to his reformulation of the axial problematic, and each of them leads to open questions related to those inherited from the more philosophical phase. On the one hand, the reinterpretation of the axial breakthrough as a set of changes to basic sociocultural structures (supposedly common to otherwise divergent patterns) calls for further analysis of mutually constitutive relationships between culture and power; on the other hand, the emphasis on the plurality of civilizations foreshadows more detailed comparative study of the different meanings and directions given to axial innovations, not least with regard to cultural interpretations of power.

Björn Wittrock's paper begins with a discussion of the contested and intermittent but unmistakably significant twentieth-century turn to global history; if the idea of the Axial Age is situated in this context, the period in question can be compared to other phases of cultural crystallization. The most familiar and most thoroughly studied case of that kind is the transition to modernity, but its significance can only be properly appreciated if it is seen as a multi-dimensional process which included epistemic and conceptual changes, intertwined with the better known structural ones. On the most basic level, epistemic transformations are related to articulations of the most fundamental dimensions of human existence, more particularly reflexivity, historicity and agency; they also led to the elaboration and textual codification of more reflective cosmologies. A reinterpretation of the Axial Age from this perspective can draw on Jaspers's crucial insights and integrate them into a research programme which would at the same time avoid the oversimplifications and short-circuitings characteristic of earlier approaches. The general orientations characteristic of axiality can be distinguished from the specific paths of particular traditions or civilizations. Such paths may be easier to define in some cases than others (Wittrock distinguishes Judaic, Greek, Chinese, Indian and Iranian patterns), but further research

should enable us to refine the model. The cultural crystallizations associated with the Axial Age should also be distinguished from related but not contemporaneous institutional transformations, involving the growth of empires as well as the intensification of contacts between separate civilizational complexes.

Peter Wagner argues that it may be useful to consider the unfolding debate on the Axial Age as an exercise in the very reflexivity whose origins are being explored. The key formulations and revisions of the Axial Age hypothesis reflect twentieth century shifts in the self-understanding of European civilization. But if this connection is subjected to critical scrutiny, it seems to have been more than a background factor: models used to make sense of the Axial Age and its historical legacy are too reminiscent of much later patterns to be above suspicion. The idea of intellectual breakthroughs codified in classical texts bears more than a passing resemblance to modern visions of ideological vanguards and their guiding role in social change. As for the notion of whole civilizations—"cultures" writ large—embodying axial orientations, the analogy with modern cultural-linguistic conceptions of the foundations of socio-political order is bound to suggest itself. In view of these implausible affinities, it seems advisable to de-concretize the current models and shift the focus of the debate to constellations of radicalized reflexivity (theoretical and practical). The comparative history of such developments is too underdeveloped to justify strong claims about exceptional or privileged historical periods. The assumption that breakthroughs translate into comprehensive and durable patterns is in any case misguided: the long-term dynamics of civilizations set limits to the institutionalization of reflexivity and often lead to retreats from earlier achievements. As a record of multiple transformations and repeated losses, the European experience seems particularly relevant to this more nuanced vision of history.

Notions of a past Golden Age, accompanied by visions of a present world in chaos and decline, are not uncommon in the traditions most closely associated with axial breakthroughs; they were obviously more developed in some cases than others, and they may be reflected in some modern interpretations of the period. A comparative analysis of this theme and its later variations has yet to be undertaken. But if modern interpretations of the Axial Age are—to a varying extent, but always in some degree—related to the self-understanding expressed in its representative ideas and figures, a comparative sur-

vey of different approaches should also include attempts to recapture these visions of a Golden Age from the vantage point of a world in search of order. Arpad Szakolczai's paper presents an original but little known thinker, Bela Hamvas, whose work seems to have been an exemplary case of that genre. Although the period in question was central to Hamvas's account of universal history, he did not define it in terms of radical intellectual innovations (and his vocabulary carries no "axial" connotations); as he saw it, the most conspicuous feature was a twofold turn to objectification and subjectivization, exemplified by sacred texts and prophetic figures. But the core ideas had to do with inherited visions of revealed order and ways of restoring it. However, the very effort to reaffirm order reflects the experience of its dissolution, and the remedies proposed during the Axial Age were ambiguous in that they also paved the way for further decline of order into a mask and an instrument for imperial *hubris*. As Szakolczai shows, a basic conceptual separation of being and life underpins Hamvas's distinction between the archaic truth and the historical perversions of order. But his defence of Christianity as a decisive return to sacred tradition gives a distinctive twist to his understanding of the Axial Age.

THE AXIAL AGE AND ITS INTERPRETERS: REOPENING A DEBATE

JOHANN P. ARNASON

The idea of "axial civilizations" or "civilizations of the Axial Age" draws on two distinct sources. Speculations about a historical epoch characterized by uniquely radical cultural or spiritual innovations were at first only loosely and intermittently linked to the problematic of civilizations in the plural. No clear-cut conception of the latter is to be found in the work which first used the term "Axial Age" (see the discussion below); its frame of reference is best described as a philosophy of history in search of broader horizons. Conversely, the pioneers of comparative civilizational analysis took no particular interest in the parallels or convergences that might define a privileged epoch. As will be seen, the most important classical contribution to civilizational theory contains a brief and marginal allusion to the Axial Age—without any particular label for it, and without any indication of further questions to be raised. It is only in the work of S. N. Eisenstadt that the two lines of argument are brought together in a systematic fashion. His analyses of axial or Axial Age civilizations (he has used both terms) are central to a broader framework for theoretical and comparative-historical inquiry. But his project has unfolded in ways which suggest enduring tension between the axial and civilizational aspects. Although Eisenstadt has defined the civilizational dimension of sociological analysis more clearly than any earlier theorist, he has not gone on to develop a comprehensive conceptual scheme for civilizational theory. A comparative interpretation of axial civilizations tends to occupy the space that might—on more general grounds—have been reserved for theoretical elaboration. On the other hand, Eisenstadt's most detailed civilizational case study (perhaps the most systematic one ever written) is not located within the axial field: it deals with Japan, the only non-axial civilization that has not only successfully survived alongside axial neighbours, but outdone most of them in adapting to modernity and

developing its own versions of key modern institutions.

In short, the programmatic fusion of axial and civilizational perspectives leaves quite a few questions open. They begin with the combination of historical and typological approaches. The distinctive features of a particular epoch are linked to specific civilizational patterns. Much of the debate documented in earlier publications (and continued in the present one revolves around this twofold thematic focus. Should the whole problematic of "axiality" be redefined in typological terms, or are there valid reasons to insist on its embeddedness in historical contexts? The present writer tends to prefer the latter alternative, but to begin with, it may be useful to concentrate on preliminaries. The following discussion will begin with a historical perspective and trace the overt or latent theoretical implications of earlier attempts to understand the Axial Age; it will conclude with brief and selective comments on Eisenstadt's attempt to incorporate the idea of "axiality" into historical sociology.

Intuitions and Anticipations

The *prima facie* case for the Axial Age hypothesis—some version of it—is easy to state. Core traditions of major civilizational complexes relate to a certain period (roughly defined: from the eighth to the third centuries BCE) in a uniquely significant way. This applies to the Western philosophical tradition, with its successively rediscovered Greek sources, and in a more indirect way also to the monotheistic religions. It also holds valid for the only non-monotheistic world religion, even if Buddhism came to regard the concrete historicity of its founder as much less important than the monotheistic traditions did. And although the trajectory of Hinduism is much less clear-cut than the others, it seems to include a reflexive turn taken during the period in question, which did not translate directly into further growth or expansion, but generated intellectual resources which would prove crucial a much later resurgence. As for the Chinese world, its axial pedigree was particularly visible until the collapse of scriptural Confucianism at the beginning of the twentieth century; its relevance to the upheavals since then is a matter of debate. In all these cases, cultural traditions were intertwined with distinctive long-term patterns of political life—such as the Chinese imperial tradition, the ambiguous and contested relationship between Brahmins and kings in India, or the varying but not arbitrarily fluc-

tuating ways of relating monotheism to political power. In short, traditions that trace themselves back to the Axial Age are bound up with specific dynamics of state formation, interstate formation and empire-building.

If we reject the leveling notion of an "invention of tradition" (the most extreme and intellectually suicidal version of what Norbert Elias called the "retreat of sociology into the present"), and accept that some "fusion of horizons" is always involved in the ongoing reinterpretation of traditions, the above considerations amount to good reasons for further inquiry into the Axial Age as a period of "cultural crystallization."[1] But this preliminary demarcation says nothing about the content of axial transformations, nor about structural similarities between them.

Who discovered the Axial Age? Karl Jaspers, whose interpretation will be discussed below, mentions Lasaulx and Viktor v. Strauss as the earliest pioneers. I have not been able to consult their writings, but the formulations quoted by Jaspers are unconvincing.[2] Lasaulx speaks of "reformers of the national religion" appearing simultaneously in various regions (his list includes Numa Pompilius!), but this is surely not enough to credit him with the idea of an axial breakthrough; Strauss refers even more vaguely to "a strange movement of the spirit" affecting all civilized peoples. More generally speaking, it is one thing to observe parallels between cultural innovations in separate regions, and another to see them as world-historical transformations in the sense that we now associate with the idea of the Axial Age. If the second point is the decisive criterion, Jaspers's first two sources should be written off.

Jaspers is on firmer ground when he comes to Alfred Weber, whom he credits with the first "methodologically arguable hypothesis"[3] about the origins of the Axial Age. But before discussing Alfred Weber's contribution (and Jaspers's rendering of it), we should note

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[1] See the discussion of this concept in Wittrock 2001.

[2] See Jaspers 1953, 8-9. Aleida Assmann (1989) traces the idea of the Axial Age back to the eighteenth century, more precisely to Anquetil-Duperron's description of the period in question as "une grande révolution du genre humain" (she mentions D. Metzler as a source of information, but there is no reference to a publication). Its history would thus be comparable to the notion of civilizations in the plural: both go back to marginal eighteenth-century intuitions that are later developed into fully-fledged concepts.

[3] Jaspers 1953, 16.

an author unmentioned by Jaspers. In the second section of his work on Hinduism and Buddhism, first published in *Archiv für Sozialwissenschaft und Sozialpolitik* in 1916, Max Weber claims that debates within the Indian philosophies of nature and religion reached their apex beginning in the seventh century BCE (he sees this as a joint achievement of Brahmins and kshatriyas), and then adds a footnote to the effect that the Indian breakthrough coincided with the "first flowering" of Greek and Chinese philosophy, as well as of Israelite prophecy. He rejects the idea of any significant mutual borrowings (*Entlehnungen*) but singles out for future discussion the question of Babylonian influence (he never returned to it).[4] The footnote speaks only of parallels, but in other works by Weber, there is no doubt that in all four cases (the Zoroastrian religion does not figure on this list), the results of the breakthroughs are seen as formative foundations of whole cultural worlds, and frameworks for long-term rationalizing processes. In other words: we have here, *in nuce*, an Axial Age hypothesis.

But there is more to the footnote. Weber rejects (in brackets) what he calls "Eduard Meyer's occasional strange allusions to common cosmic-biological conditions of this stage of development". He does not mention any particular text. The editors of the *Max Weber Gesamtausgabe* propose to fill the gap with a reference to " Meyer, *Geschichte des Altertums*, I, 1. Abt., S. 173-183." This is a chapter in Meyer's prolegomena to his history of antiquity, subtitled "Elemente der Anthropologie." But if we turn to this text, we find no explicit discussion of the parallels mentioned by Weber, and nothing at all about any "cosmic –biological" background. What we do find, however, is an argument that has some bearing on the question of the Axial Age. Meyer analyzes what he calls the three basic polarities of history: innovative ideas against traditional habits, the inner world against the external one, and individual against collectivity. He concludes that the third polarity is—potentially—the most radical one, and most capable of concentrating the dynamics of all three. Exceptionally creative individuals become the most effective bearers of new ideas against conservative traditions, and of inner spiritual aspirations against obstacles in the external world. The whole chapter deals with general patterns of the historical world, but in

[4] Weber, M (1996), 247, n. 23.

an earlier section, Meyer had already identified Hesiod and the Jewish prophets as the first clearly epoch-making cases of creative individuality. There is no reference to India or China, but if we put this observation together with the more general discussion, we can see Meyer's approach as at least a significant step towards an axial model.

Alfred Weber took the next—and more decisive—step. It may be useful to approach his argument through Jaspers's critique of it. There is a curious discrepancy between the discussion in the main text and a note at the end.[5] Jaspers first attributes to Alfred Weber the view that there was a "real uniformity within the Eurasian bloc", and (as already noted) a specific and testable (in fact refutable) hypothesis about the main cause of axial innovations: "the penetration of the nations of charioteers and horsemen from Central Asia", which supposedly caused upheavals within the domains of ancient civilizations, and ultimately led to the discovery of "the problematic character of existence". In fact, both claims are misleading. Weber did not treat the Eurasian continent as a historical bloc (the "cultural wholes" with which he is concerned are regional units), and he made no specific claims about "equestrian peoples" triggering a spiritual transformation of older civilizations (the argument about invaders from the Eurasian heartland is, as we shall see, formulated in much more general terms). It is only in the note that Jaspers begins to discuss Weber's ideas on a more adequate basis. As he notes, Weber's opening statement proves incompatible with the conceptual framework on which his interpretive history relies. The introduction to *Kulturgeschichte als Kultursoziologie* contains a clear—perhaps the first clear—formulation of the Axial Age hypothesis: as Weber sees it, "a religious and philosophical quest, enquiry and decision directed toward universals."[6] The emphasis is, in other words, on a new and more radical kind of questioning, with a new and more universal orientation, but also on the normative results of this turn. According to Weber, this happens simultaneously in three cultural spheres: the Hither Asiatic-Greek, the Indian and the Chinese, and he distinguishes three foci within the first one: Zoroastrian religion, Jewish prophecy and Greek philosophy. As for the chronology, he

[5] See Jaspers (1953), 16-18 and 278-79.

[6] Weber, A. (1950), 24; here I follow the translation in Jaspers (1953), 279.

clearly prefers early dates: from the ninth to the sixth century BCE. But when it comes to a concrete interpretation of the course of history, the idea of a "synchronistic world epoch" is implicitly abandoned in favour of a very different guideline: the distinction between primary and secondary *Hochkulturen*. This is not Weber's version of the distinction between pre-axial and axial civilizations; rather, it represents an alternative perspective on world history, one which prevents Weber from taking the axial hypothesis beyond tentative beginnings. As a result, the Chinese and Indian developments which were first (in the introduction) compared to Greek and Jewish breakthroughs, are later (in the main text) analyzed as shifts within the spiritual universe of primary cultures. No attempt is made to show how parallels might nevertheless be drawn between the ways of "quest, enquiry and decision" in West and East. The two conflicting lines of interpretation reflect incompatible sets of assumptions; Jaspers notes only one point: Weber interprets history in terms of the growth and dissolution of closed cultural wholes (*Geschichtsbezirke*, *Geschichtskörper* etc.), and this prevents him from taking the adumbrated idea of "world epochs" seriously. To put it another way, we might say that Weber's approach reflects an unresolved tension between conceptions of civilization in the singular and civilizations in the plural. But contrary to what Jaspers suggests, it seems to me that Weber proposes an internally consistent (even if objectively untenable) interpretation of Chinese and Indian innovations, exemplified by Confucianism and Buddhism, as confined within the boundaries of primary cultures (he has, moreover, a relatively detailed explanatory model for the Indian case, but not for the Chinese one). To clarify this point, a few words must be said about the dichotomy of primary and secondary *Hochkulturen*. For Weber's use of it, it is essential that multiple derivative distinctions can be made within each category. Every *Hochkultur* is the creation of conquerors who impose a new socio-cultural edifice on an essentially immobile peasantry. The hallmark of a primary culture is the prevalence of an all-encompassing magical worldview (*Magismus)* which unites rulers and ruled. But even in the primary formations par excellence, Egypt and Mesopotamia, the magic totality cannot function without a strong admixture of rationality; Weber speaks of a "marriage between primitive magic and the first rational organization of economy, state and society."[7]

[7] Ibid., 54.

China and India represent a further stage: a kind of secondary formation within the primary category. In addition to being shot through with rationality, magic here takes a reflexive turn (Weber does not use this term, but it seems appropriate; he refers to the Confucian mode of thought as "*konservative Selbstbesinnung*", and this also applies—mutatis mutandis—to Buddhism). The result is a sublimation of the "magistic" worldview, not a radical questioning of it. The only real breakthrough, a disruption of the magical totality, occurred in the Hither Asiatic-Greek region; here the successive cycles of secondary *Hochkulturen* began with Persians, Jews and Greeks.

Neither the first emergence of primary *Hochkulturen,* nor the distinction between primary and secondary ones, nor the further differentiations within each category, can be understood without reference to a further component of Weber's conceptual scheme: the constant presence and periodic intrusion of the conquering nomads who both create and destroy cultures. The equestrian peoples from Inner Asia appear as a permanent disruptive and transformative factor, and it is the intensification of their direct and indirect impact on the Hither Asiatic region that explains why developments there took a more discontinuous turn than in the East.

In the present context, there is no need to enter into the details of Weber's narrative. But two points should be noted before moving on to more recent and relevant work. First, the distinction between primary and secondary *Hochkulturen*—although not very instructive as it stands—may serve as a reminder of the different combinations of continuity and discontinuity. Although Weber makes no attempt to apply the Axial Age hypothesis to India and China, his analysis highlights some reasons to believe that the putative axial breakthroughs there were not characterized by quite the same kind or level of discontinuity as on the Western side; in that sense, he anticipates arguments that can be or have been developed in the context of more elaborate versions of the Axial Age hypothesis. Second, the idea of horse-riding and cattle-rearing nomads as the creators of all Eurasian civilizations (beginning with Sumer!) is no longer a matter of serious debate, but Weber's absurdly oversimplified picture draws attention to a problem which must be posed in more nuanced terms: civilizational transformations must be analyzed in connection with relations between the civilizational centres and their barbarian peripheries, and the changing configurations of that

relationship—irreducible to any constant formula—are a crucial theme for comparative history.

Karl Jaspers: Insights and Over-Interpretations

Jaspers's *Origin and Goal of History* contains the first fully-fledged interpretation of the Axial Age. But from the viewpoint of historical sociology, his line of argument does not lead to results of the kind that could serve to anchor and contextualize further inquiry. Although he admits that "sociological considerations" are needed, he cautions that they "merely illuminate the facts and do not provide a causal explanation of them."[8] He is interested in the Axial Age as a "total spiritual phenomenon" which subsumes and sublates the sociological aspects. I am, of course, not suggesting that we should aim at an exhaustive causal explanation, but we are—ex hypothesi—interested in the social-historical context of a cultural mutation, and the decontextualizing thrust of Jaspers's analysis is too strong for his work to be very useful on that level. He does not provide a historical-sociological model that could be tested and developed. But that is not the whole story. As I will try to show, we can extract from his theory a whole set of questions which ought to be central to our discussion, and which will prove relevant when it comes to more substantive sociological approaches. These questions—there are, to begin with, six of them, and more could no doubt be added to the list—are not so much posed as indicated *ex negativo* by Jaspers's argument. His claims—including some of his most aberrantly unhistorical statements—can, in retrospect, be read as attempts to settle, bypass or neutralize unstated problems to which we must return.

1. The first question concerns the hermeneutical presuppositions of theorizing about the Axial Age. Jaspers presents his thesis—very explicitly—as an alternative to Christian and post-Christian philosophies of history. From St. Augustine to Hegel (by implication, this would include the post-Hegelian phase of secular religion), Western visions of universal history have centred on a Christian or post-Christian axis of progress. For Jaspers, "the spiritual process" of the Axial Age is an empirically discovered starting-point for a "common

[8] Jaspers (1953), 18.

frame of historical self-comprehension for all peoples." The period "when man, as we know him today, came into being"[9] is the obvious—indeed the only possible—key to global history. Jaspers presents this relocation of the axis as a definitive correction. But it seems legitimate to assume that our attempts to understand the Axial Age will reflect a *Vorverständnis* derived from Western sources—more specifically, from the changing combinations of Greek and Jewish sources that have been central to Western traditions, and that this can only be corrected through ongoing confrontation with the other heirs to axial legacies. The de-Westernizing of the axis would, in that sense, be an infinite or at least a very long-term task. Conversely, it is only through encounters with other traditions that we can clarify the choices and presuppositions built into our own tradition (or set of traditions). This is, in other words, a hermeneutical circle which we can expand or deepen, but not leave behind.

2. The second—and most complex—question has to do with one of Jaspers's basic assumptions, obviously central to his argument but quite untenable in light of the knowledge now available. Pre-axial cultures (he refers not only to Egypt and Babylonia, but also to the Indus civilization and early China) were, as he puts it, "in some manner unawakened."[10] His concept of the Axial Age is based on a blanket denial of the historicity of early civilizations (notwithstanding their nominal recognition as "historical civilizations" later in the book). In this view, all later attempts to preserve the heritage of those "unawakened" cultures, or even to extract permanently valid models from it, are in fact grounded in new visions of axial origin.

Nobody would now want to defend this view of ancient civilizations. Their historicity is universally recognized, and this poses—in very general terms—a problem for defenders of the Axial Age hypothesis: if we can no longer argue in terms of a break-out from an unawakened, unhistorical or inarticulate condition, exactly what kind of breakthrough is it? But to better grasp the problem, we must consider more specific implications. There are at least five separate issues that should be listed under this heading.

First, there is the *general historicity* of the civilizations in question: a dynamic which they have in common, inasmuch as they represent a new state-centred order. The crucial point here is the rela-

[9] Ibid., 1.
[10] Ibid., 6.

tionship between political power and religious imagination. Marcel Gauchet discusses this problem on a very abstract level, but the general thrust of his comments is convincing: he refers to the state as a "transformateur sacral", and to a "latent logic of the state, as an enterprise intrinsically productive of religion." This line of thought is explicitly linked to the question of the Axial Age: Gauchet suggests that we cannot understand "the prodigious groundswell" from China to Greece, and from 800 to 200 BCE, which "divides the history of religion into two phases—and which K. Jaspers, for this reason, labeled the "axial period" of universal history—without relating it to the immense amount of subterranean spiritual effort (*travail spirituel*) inherent in the political division and in its unfolding (*dépli)* through expansion."[11] If there is a mutually constitutive, and always to some degree mutually transformative dynamic of politics and religion at work in early civilizations, we must think of the axial breakthrough(s) as culmination(s) of long-term processes; this does not exclude structural innovations, even of a radical kind. These must then be analyzed in the processual context.

However, all generalizations about early civilizations are—this is the second point—handicapped by the fact that we understand (or at least have reasons to believe that we understand) some of them much better than others. At one end of the spectrum, interpretations of Egypt and Mesopotamia have—however controversial—opened up whole cultural worlds whose historical experience has yet to be duly integrated into the comparative study of civilizations. At the other end, it seems clear that growing agreement on the importance and originality of the Indus civilization has been accompanied by almost complete disagreement on the specifics: "The geographical sprawl of the Indus civilization is more than twice that of Mesopotamia. Beyond this observation almost everything else concerning the nature of the Indus civilization is the subject of controversy and debate. Almost every interpretation, based upon a common set of archeological evidence, is confronted by another scholar who presents a diametrically opposed point of view."[12] To quote the same author, this is the "enigmatic civilization" par excellence. Its inaccessibility—from our point of view—is obviously not unrelated to its internal structure: it seems clear that writing was not used for the

[11] Gauchet (1985), 43, 42.
[12] Lamberg-Karlovsky (1996), 176.

same purposes as in Egypt and Mesopotamia.[13] But some of the more plausible speculations are tantalizing. Some scholars surmise that the striking uniformity of material culture (all the more remarkable because of the size of the civilizational area) might reflect a caste-like structure—or perhaps, more precisely, a more egalitarian pattern later integrated into the caste system proper which took shape in the aftermath of conquest. Other suggestions are inspired by the failure of all excavations to identify beyond reasonable doubt a palace or a temple. It seems conceivable, although there is no way to prove it, that "the universal tension between temple and palace",[14] i.e. the above-mentioned inter-dynamic of politics and religion, had in some way been neutralized. These issues belong to the broader—and particularly intractable—problematic of the background to the axial breakthrough in India.

But let us return to the more positive side of the problem. The third point to note is the *specific historicity* of the civilizations in question, at least of the better documented and understood among them. Distinctive inventions and developmental patterns are characteristic of each case. Mesopotamia invented the city-state and the first "multi- power actor civilization";[15] Egypt pioneered the territorial state as a new type of order.[16] Obvious contrasts stand out on the cultural level as well. There is no Egyptian parallel to the multi-ethnic—and to some extent multi-cultural—configurations of Mesopotamia, beginning with the coexistence of Sumerians and Akkadians. But although this did (at least according to Jean Bottero) involve some variations on religious themes, the religious formation as a whole was more conservative than its Egyptian counterpart: there is no Mesopotamian parallel to the invention of the judgment of the dead (according to Assmann, one of the "fundamental ideas of human history"[17]), nor to the abortive but significant invention of a new religion by a ruling pharaoh in the fourteenth century BCE.

These considerations should highlight a point of some importance for the debate on the Axial Age: if the hypothesis is to make sense, it must be formulated in a way that avoids strong assumptions about

[13] See Fairservis 1992.
[14] Lamberg-Karlovsky (1996), 179.
[15] Mann (1986), 73.
[16] Assmann (1996), 51
[17] Assmann (1990), 122.

a uniform background. In Jaspers's case, these assumptions are—as we have seen—extreme and unhistorical; but the later debate suggests that the problem is not easy to deal with. It becomes more acute if we take a fourth point into account: the attempts that have been made to interpret ancient civilizations—or at least the prime cases among them—as based on different images or paradigms of the human condition. This *topos* has, in more or less explicit terms, figured in interpretations of Egypt and Mesopotamia. In a well-known, somewhat dated but still interesting work on "speculative thought in the Ancient Near East", Thorkild Jacobsen distinguished what he called the basic moods of the two civilizations: the Egyptian one "accorded to man and to man's tangible achievements more basic significance that most civilizations have been willing to do", whereas for the Mesopotamian one, "the centre and meaning of existence always lay beyond man and his achievements, beyond tangible things in intangible powers ruling the universe."[18] More recently, and in a more speculative vein, Jaroslav Krejčí analyzed the two civilizations as expressions of different paradigms of the human condition: the "theocentric" one in Mesopotamia and the "thanatocentric" one in Egypt.[19]

One last point remains to be considered. To do justice to the historicity of the ancient civilizations, we also have to take into account the crises (in some cases terminal) which separate them from the axial ones. These breakdowns of earlier forms of civilized life are also a part of the background to the axial breakthroughs, however difficult it might be to theorize about them. More specifically, there seem to have been two major historical episodes of this kind. The better known (but still notoriously controversial) one unfolded in and around the eastern Mediterranean in the thirteenth and twelfth centuries BCE.[20] The two oldest civilizational centres (Egypt and Mesopotamia) survived, but others collapsed, and this paved the way for new patterns of state formation. Historians seem to agree that several factors were involved, although there is no clear picture of their interaction: rivalry among power centres, exhaustion of a limited resource basis, social unrest, and—particularly impor-

[18] Jacobsen in Frankfort et al. (1946), 137.

[19] See Krejčí 1993.

[20] For the two most interesting interpretations of this episode, see Sandars (1985) and Drews (1993).

tant—breakdowns in the power balance between centres and peripheries. As for the outcome, Mario Liverani makes a number of interesting comments as to the results, with explicit reference to the Axial Age. He sees the crisis of the late Bronze Age as a structural breakdown of the "palatial mode of production" and the corresponding power structures that had been characteristic of the Bronze Age civilizations, and as the starting-point for a whole set of new trends. They include state building on a new basis, with stronger emphasis on identification with an ethnic community, sometimes through apparent re-tribalization (Liverani contrasts the "stato cittadino" of the early civilizations with a "stato gentilizio" that appears in the Iron Age); new imperial projects, especially the Assyrian one; but also a long-term dissolution of the archaic bond between religion and politics, which culminated in the Axial Age.[21]

The other crisis occurred at an earlier date in a less well known region, and we know next to nothing about the processes involved, but there can be no doubt about the importance of the long-term consequences. The probably interconnected collapses of the Indus civilization, the cultures of the East Iranian plateau, and the Oxus civilization (the most recent addition to our list of Bronze Age civilizations) in the second quarter of the second millennium BCE left a vacuum later occupied by the Indo-European ancestors of axial civilizations in Iran and India (it now seems widely accepted that this is a more plausible scenario than that of an Indo-European invasion destroying the older civilizations, although in the case of the Oxus civilization—where the process may have started—conflicts between urban and nomad populations probably played a major role).[22]

3. To return to Jaspers: the next question relates to his definition of the common denominator of axial breakthroughs. His most condensed statement on this subject describes the Axial Age as the moment when "man becomes conscious of Being as a whole, of himself and his limitations", and "experiences absoluteness in the depths of selfhood and in the lucidity of transcendence."[23] This formulation is obviously reminiscent of Jaspers's own version of

[21] See Liverani (1988), 629-60 and 934-48.
[22] See Lamberg-Karlovsky (1996), 218-50, on the "eclipse in the East."
[23] Jaspers (1953), 8.

existential philosophy; he seems, in other words, to impose an anachronistic and uniformitarian model on a historical experience that should first be analyzed with all due allowance for diversity. Can the axial breakthroughs be interpreted as a new round of variations on the theme of human being-in-the-world? This perspective (not to be confused with the stark dichotomy of searching for meaning within or beyond the world (as Voegelin would have it, at least in the earlier phase of his work) would link up with a clue to be found in one of the most important philosophical texts of the twentieth century: "It is a matter, in the case of each civilization, of finding the Idea in the Hegelian sense, that is, not a law of the physico-mathematical type discoverable by objective thought, but that formula which sums up some unique manner of behaviour towards others, towards nature, time and death: a certain way of patterning the world (*mise en forme du monde*) which the historian should be capable of seizing upon and making his own."[24] This idea has yet to be taken up and developed in systematic ways by civilizational theory; its implications for the Axial Age hypothesis would be worth exploring.

A brief digression on a recent—and in my opinion important step in that direction may be useful. Rémi Brague suggests that the discovery of the idea of the world coincides more or less with what Karl Jaspers called the Axial Age.[25] This thesis is backed up by closer analysis of the proto-Western versions of the axial breakthrough: the Greeks and—much less directly and extensively—the Jews. For Brague, the explicit thematization of what constitutes the world as such—*die Weltlichkeit der Welt,* to use the language best suited to this genre of thought—is above all else a Greek achievement. As he notes (with reference to authorities in the field), the languages of the Ancient Near East did not have expressions referring to the world as such (in a more tentative vein, he makes the same suggestion about ancient Chinese); in his terminology, they therefore had cosmographies and cosmogonies, but no cosmology. Cosmological reflection began with the Greeks; but as the term indicates, it took a particular direction: an emphatic conception of order, *kosmos,* shaped the course of a whole cosmological tradition. There was, however, another side

[24] Merleau-Ponty (1962), XVIII.
[25] Brague (1999),

to the Greek breakthrough: the reflexive dimension of cosmology—as Brague understands it—involves at least the beginnings of a reflection on "the presence in the world of a subject capable of experiencing it as such", i.e. the human being; "a cosmology must therefore imply some kind of anthropology."[26] Divergent possibilities are built into this mode of thought. On the one hand, the notion of a cosmic order as a model to be reproduced or imitated on the human level, on the other the idea of "man as a measure of all things." But when we reconsider archaic civilizations in light of the Greek innovations, we face a double task: to spell out the implicit notions of the world, and to avoid contamination by the Greek paradigm of order. In this context, Brague draws on Jan Assmann's work on Egypt; the most important point seems to be the description of the Egyptian worldview as a "negative cosmology"[27] i.e. one which sees order as partial, fluid, problematic, and dependent on the incessant joint activity of gods and humans. The more general lesson to be drawn from this is that a comparative study of the imagined relationships between world and order (instead of taking the equation of the two for granted) would be essential to a reformulation of the Axial Age hypothesis.

4. If we move from the cultural core to the social context, the "sociological considerations" included in Jaspers's model boil down to a very sketchy description of power structures. He refers several times to "small states and cities", and on one occasion he expands this into a reference to " a struggle of all against all, which to begin with nevertheless permitted an astonishing prosperity, an unfolding of vigour and wealth."[28] Both the stimulus of competition and the upheavals caused by it seem to be regarded as conducive to—not determinative of—a spiritual breakthrough. The question bypassed here has to do with the complex—and not at all invariant—patterns of state formation to which the axial transformations are linked. To speak of "small states and cities" with regard to both China and Greece (Jaspers's two main examples) is highly misleading: the size as well as the structures and the rationalizing strategies of the contending units in China were very different from the Greek pattern. In India, the picture is—as with everything else related to the In-

[26] Ibid., 65.
[27] Assmann (1990), 37.
[28] Jaspers (1953), 4.

dian axial breakthrough—less clear. We can make some kind of connection between state formation in the eastern Ganges plain and the rise of Buddhism, but it is much less obvious what the Upanishads might have had to do with that kind of background. When it comes to the Near East, the Jewish breakthrough has less to do with competition between "small states and cities" than with the uncertain fortunes of a small state in an environment dominated by overwhelmingly powerful empires. But this case can also be seen from another angle. As recent work by various authors of otherwise divergent opinions (from Cornelius Castoriadis to Christian Meier and Kurt Raaflaub) has shown, the Greek *polis* represents a unique self-limiting pattern of state formation, and it is therefore misleading to subsume it under the broader category of the city-state. Jan Assmann analyzes the pattern which prevailed in ancient Israel as a very different version of self-limiting—even anti-statist—state formation: here the relocation *(Umbuchung)* of political obligation from king to god created a counterweight to the state's pursuit of power.[29]

In short, there is a whole spectrum of state structures and state-building strategies that should be central to the comparative study of axial civilizations—from the patterns theorized by the Chinese Legalists to the Greek and Jewish exceptions. The Achaemenid Empire should, of course, be included in the picture; paradoxically, it may be easier to figure out its relationship to axial developments on its internal and external periphery than to solve the problem of its connections with the domestic axial religion (Zoroastrianism). The new imperial order established by the Achaemenids was clearly crucial to the Judaism of the Second Temple; and if we take the view (which seems to me overwhelmingly plausible) that the democratic turn of the *polis* revolution (and, together with it, the self-destructive project of the Athenian empire) was provoked by the Persian Wars, the Achaemenid factor also influenced the axial dynamic of Greek civilization.

5. With the Achaemenids, we come to another aspect of Jaspers's problematic. As he saw it, the Axial Age ended everywhere in unequivocal decline: it "lost its creativeness", and "a process of dogmatic fixation and leveling-down took place in all three cultural realms."[30] The legacy did not disappear, but it was traditionalized;

[29] Assmann (2000), 46-71.
[30] Jaspers (1953), 5.

it became "a model and an object of veneration."[31] But then Jaspers seems to contradict himself when he admits that a "spiritual tension" remained active. At the same time, he argues that the decline went hand in hand with imperial resurgence: "Everywhere the first outcome of the decline was an order of technological and organizational planning";[32] the Qin, the Maurya and the Hellenistic and Roman empire-builders are listed as protagonists of this trend. The imperial idea as such is not an axial invention: for Jaspers, it is a heritage from the ancient civilizations, and its revival is in that sense a return to an earlier phase of history. But the post-axial empires draw on axial sources to construct their ideological frameworks. It is not clear whether Jaspers thinks that this invests them with genuinely new meaning.

Two interconnected questions are involved here, and Jaspers's preemptive answers to them are neither clear nor consistent: What are the long-term effects of axial legacies, and the patterns of their formative influences? And how is this cultural impact linked to imperial formations? The modes of reinterpretation and systematization of axial legacies differ from one civilization to another. To mention only the most obvious case, the Christian and Islamic reinventions of monotheism differ from the cultural-religious dynamics of Indian and Chinese traditions.

As for the imperial formations, there is no uniform pattern to their relationships with axial legacies. The only empire directly and importantly involved in the history of the Axial Age was the Achaemenid one (on several fronts: in addition to the cases mentioned above, it probably affected developments in India). On the other hand, an imperial background (Western Zhou) seems to have been essential to the legacy which the most lastingly influential current of axial thought in China wanted to preserve and refine. And although the Han empire was, in the short run (as opposed to its Mediterranean counterpart) unable to cope with a structural crisis that came to a head in the third century BCE, it laid the foundations for the most enduring of all imperial traditions. In so doing, it drew on a synthesis of axial traditions—imperial Confucianism—which has no parallel elsewhere at a comparable point in time. In India, the elusive

[31] Ibid., 6.
[32] Ibid., 5.

and short-lived Mauryan Empire was perhaps—due to the conversion of its most distinguished ruler to Buddhism—at one point more receptive to axial innovations than any other contemporary state, but this did not translate into any lasting achievements. The Sassanian Empire reactivated an axial legacy after a long interval of complex developments. The Roman Empire is a particularly complex case: During its most expansionistic phase, the imperial project as such was not grounded in any systematic elaboration of axial ideas; the rationalizing and stabilizing turn taken when the Empire shed its republican form owed something to more intensive contact with Hellenistic offshoots of the Greek Axial Age; and when a structural crisis led to a radical reinterpretation (the Christian Empire), the decisive contribution came from an axial tradition outside the Empire's original cultural context.

6. Finally, Jaspers describes post-axial history (not the decline that set in at the end of the Axial Age, but the long-term potential reactivated at later junctures) from two different points of view. On the one hand, each axial breakthrough inaugurates a history of its own. The axial civilizations exist, more concretely speaking, as regions and traditions, and periodic returns to the sources are characteristic of all of them. Given the distinctive character of each tradition, the fundamental parallels may not be mutually evident—hence, for example, the need to argue against recurrent misunderstandings—including Alfred Weber's theory—that India and China should be put alongside the West, rather than alongside Egypt and Babylonia. On the other hand, Jaspers claims that the dynamic of the Axial Age became historically all-embracing, and that only the peoples who became involved in it took part in universal history. He goes even further: "Between these three realms (i.e. the three axial regions, J.P.A.), a *profound mutual comprehension was possible* from the moment they met. At the first encounter they recognized that they were concerned with the same problems."[33] I do not think that the rest of the book does much to back up this astonishing statement, and it would be all too easy to marshal evidence against it from modern history; one might begin with the exceptionally catastrophic history of Chinese experiences with imported and adapted Western ideologies—from Taiping Christianity to Mao's version of Communism.

[33] Ibid., 8.

Jaspers thus bypasses two interrelated sets of problems: the patterns of historical experience characteristic of each axial civilization, including their varying capacities (in degree and kind) to constitute historical worlds on a larger scale (if we use the term loosely, we can speak of the globalizing potential of each civilizational complex); and the history of intercivilizational encounters, more complex after the transformations of the Axial Age, but never superseded by a state of "boundless communication."

Towards a Historical Sociology of the Axial Age

Following Jaspers's pioneering but unbalanced interpretation of the Axial Age, two major attempts, by S. N. Eisenstadt and Eric Voegelin, were made to develop a more systematic theory with more detailed reference to the historical record of the cultures in question.[34] Here the main focus will be on Eisenstadt's work. It is, of course, not being suggested that Voegelin's conception of the Axial Age is immaterial to our discussion—in fact, it will become clear that questions arising in connection with Eisenstadt's arguments have some bearing on Voegelin's approach. But for my present purposes, Eisenstadt's historical-sociological reconceptualization of the Axial Age is of primary importance. The issue of chronological priority is immaterial, and I will not speculate about the significance of Voegelin's work for Eisenstadt; it can be shown that an "axial turn" is, in any case, a logical result of the development of Eisenstadt's sociological theory, and that a specific understanding of the Axial Age responds to problems first posed in more general terms. These connections are visible on two levels. First, the interpretation of the axial breakthrough serves to concretize a critique of functionalism—and especially of functionalist conceptions of culture—that had been in the making at least since the early 1960s. If culture is—contrary to the restrictive definitions proposed by the functionalists—the articulation of social creativity, this basic characteristic is reflected in an interplay of order-maintaining and order-transforming dynamics, and the Axial Age represents a turning-point in the relationship between these two

[34] Pointers to alternative approaches can perhaps be found in some contributions to the 1975 *Daedalus* issue on the "age of transcendence", especially those of Benjamin Schwarz and Louis Dumont.

aspects: an enhancement of both the order-maintaining and the order-transforming capacity, but in such a way that the order-transforming dynamic prevails in the long run. Second, the Axial Age emerges as a necessary point of reference for Eisenstadt's critique of mainstream modernization theory.[35] The long-term dynamic of cultural traditions and their interactions with power structures turns out to be crucial to the understanding of social transformations in general and modern transformations in particular, and the Axial Age lays the foundations for particularly sustained developments of that kind. Eisenstadt's comparative study of empires takes a major step in this direction (the diverse cultural frameworks of imperial power are shown to have a logic and a historical dynamic of their own), but the decisive turn comes with his work on revolutions.[36] Paradoxically, the most emphatically innovative episodes of the modern transformation appear as the most revealing symptoms of dependence on traditional sources. Revolutionary ideologies are rooted in axial traditions, directly or indirectly, and this connection becomes the starting-point for a more general inquiry into the relationships between civilizational legacies and the multiple patterns of modernity.

For a representative summary of Eisenstadt's view on the Axial Age, we can turn to the introduction to the 1986 volume on axial civilizations; some variations on certain points may be found in other texts, but I do not think that there are any significant discrepancies. The common denominator of axial breakthroughs is, as Eisenstadt puts it, "the emergence, conceptualization and institutionalization of a basic tension between the transcendental and mundane orders."[37] A new relationship between two levels or dimensions of order is imagined, articulated in more or less systematic ways and through more or less explicit theoretical arguments, and translated into institutions, projects and practices. All other distinctive features of axial civilizations are related to this cultural core: the development of more complex modes of legitimation as well as more articulate expressions of protest, coalitions made up of a broader spectrum of elites, and ideological interpretations of social conflicts—to mention only the most salient trends.

Visions of order are thus posited as central to the historical expe-

[35] For the best discussion of this, see Knöbl (2001), pp. 239-55.
[36] See Eisenstadt (1963 and 1978).
[37] Eisenstadt (1986), 1.

riences in question. This basic assumption will have to be reconsidered, but for the time being, let us concentrate on the distinction between the transcendental and the mundane, which is obviously essential to Eisenstadt's whole argument. It is not synonymous with the difference between this-worldly and other-worldly: as Eisenstadt insists, conceptions of the basic distinction—and solutions to the problems posed by it—can be more or less this-worldly or other-worldly. This would seem to leave open two ways of defining the contrast between the transcendental and the mundane. On the one hand, it might be seen as analogous to Durkheim's distinction between the sacred and the profane (which is, as Durkheim stresses, not to be confused with the distinction between the supernatural and the natural): we would then be dealing with mutually defining concepts, with no specific content apart from the ambiguous relationship between them. We could speak of transcendental and mundane dimensions whenever there are two levels of order, interrelated in such a way that the higher one is constitutive of but imperfectly mirrored by the lower, and therefore a permanent source of normative projects of reordering. In that sense, the breakthrough to a transcendental vision would not necessarily involve a total transformation of the worldview: it might be localized in a particular dimension of social life. To use a highly relevant example, the image of the *polis* as a community of citizens could be interpreted as a transcendental model in permanent tension with the mundane orders of really existing *poleis*, and in that capacity, it provides a framework for political thought. This would be in line with one seminal interpretation of the Greek breakthrough, i.e. Christian Meier's analysis of "the political revolution of world history."

On the other hand, we could (without risking any conflation with the other-worldly) attribute a more specific and emphatic meaning to the transcendental dimension, and do so in light of the historical background against which the breakthroughs took place. This is what Eisenstadt seems to have in mind when he refers to a "higher transcendental moral or metaphysical order which is beyond any given this- or other-worldly reality"[38] (in fact, "moral *and* metaphysical" would be more appropriate). If some notion of "the other world" as

[38] Ibid., 3.

the "abode of the dead" and the "world of spirits" is characteristic of pre-axial cultures in general, the new order transcends and relativizes both worlds. And it need not take the direction of reinventing the other world, at a greater distance from but also with more imperative demands on this one: it can, on the contrary, devalue the world of the spirits and the dead by privileging the conduct and relations of human beings as trustees of order. This was clearly the thrust of the Confucian reinterpretation of older Chinese conceptions of order. In this second sense, the transcendental dimension is a matter of the overall worldview; to come back to the example mentioned above, an interpretation of the Greek breakthrough from that angle would stress the emergence of a notion of impersonal world order—beyond the gods—as the most crucial step.

It should be noted that Eisenstadt's introductory summary does not refer to universalistic orientations as a defining feature of axial civilizations. The question of universalism remains latent, and the most plausible interpretation of the argument is that the transcendental dimension of the axial world-views represents a potential opening to universalism, but it depends on the cultural context as well as the broader historical circumstances whether—or to what extent—the potential is realized. A persistently ambiguous balance between culturalism and universalism would, for example, seem to be characteristic of the Chinese tradition. Eisenstadt's later work on Japan seems to place greater emphasis on universalistic trends as components of axial patterns: when he analyzes the "de-axializing" changes which imported traditions have undergone in the Japanese context, the immanentization of transcendental orientations and the particularization of universalistic ones stand out as the main tendencies. But the general question has yet to be tackled in a more systematic fashion.

It seems clear that Eisenstadt does not treat the distinction between two orders of reality as an axial invention. As he puts it, "the transmundane order has, in all human societies, been perceived as somewhat different, usually higher and stronger, than the mundane one."[39] But in pre-axial civilizations (he also refers to them as "pagan") the structure of the transmundane world is "relatively similar" to the mundane one"; the concrete imagery that serves to throw

[39] Ibid., 2.

the other world into relief is at the same time conducive to a blurring of boundaries between the two levels. All this is noted in very general terms, more suggestive of an unchanging pre-axial condition than of any variations due to specific civilizational settings. Even so, enough has been said to indicate that the axial turn involves a radicalization of pre-existing ways of articulating the world. A processual perspective is thus in principle acknowledged as a corrective or complement to the model of a breakthrough or rupture, but it remains to be seen how far it can be taken. To what extent can we interpret axial transformations as continuations or reorientations of radicalizing trends already at work in earlier cultures? Assuming that all forms of radicalization are likely to be selective, can the regional versions of the axial turn be distinguished and compared on that basis? And could each axial pattern be seen as a set or cluster of radicalizing shifts, from which later innovations within the respective traditions can in turn select?

The themes highlighted and the questions raised—often only in passing—in Eisenstadt's introduction are addressed from a number of perspectives by other contributors to this volume. Here I will conclude with a few remarks on themes which seem essential to further development of the debate. If there is a common denominator, it is the need to bring more diversity into our interpretations of the Axial Age.

1. The first aspect to be considered is the background to the axial transformations. Eisenstadt is obviously far more sensitive to the historical realities and experiences of early civilizations than Jaspers was, but it can still be argued that his account tends to minimize both the differences between them and—at least on the level of religious traditions—the features that set them apart from the Neolithic world. As for Neolithic religions, much remains controversial, but it does not seem exaggerated to speak of broad agreement on certain basic features; Pierre Lévêque's summary is useful: "A coherent logic of a phantasmagorical Grand Totality is thus elaborated—a global nature whose two components, the natural and the supernatural, exist and coexist only through relations of interchange that can be deciphered by analysis on all conceptual and ritual levels."[40] It seems to me that Eisenstadt's strong emphasis on onto-

[40] Lévêque (1997), 97.

logical continuity or consubstantiality—as a characteristic of pre-axial cultures—tends to project this more archaic pattern onto the early civilizations, and that more attention should be paid to distinctive developments of the religious imagination in new historical settings. Lévêque notes some general trends: "the pantheon is anthropomorphized and structured; the despotic rulers are supernaturalized; the relations between the living and the dead become more complex."[41] But more specific points must be added. Jean Bottero's interpretations of Mesopotamian religion stress the theme of transcendence, elaborated from diverse angles and subject to variations within a remarkably durable framework of religious thought. Human beings are servants of the gods, the gap between the two respective levels of being is unbridgeable, and mystical union is as inconceivable as mimetic rivalry. Most importantly, there is no positive vision of immortality; the most representative anthropological statement of the Mesopotamian tradition portrays a human quest for immortality as a complete and conclusive failure. The emergence of sacred kingship reinforces both the logic of anthropomorphism and the vision of transcendence: rulership is defined with reference to the gods, but the gods are at the same time imagined as superior rulers. Obviously, these considerations do not apply to Egypt in the same way as to Mesopotamia, but at a more general level, one could perhaps analyze the Egyptian case as another variant of the unfolding relationship between anthropomorphism and transcendence. In any case, it seems to have proved easier in Egypt than in Mesopotamia to reconstruct a sequence of changing patterns of religiosity.[42]

Egypt and Mesopotamia are, of course, the most interpretable among the pre-axial civilizational complexes. But the point at issue can also be considered from the other side of the axial divide, inasmuch as the axial innovations relate to the past in divergent but equally defining ways (not to be confused with the more external ways of adapting to pre-axial mentalities and practices). To begin with a very stark contrast, the Confucian reworking of much older Chinese traditions differs in fundamental ways from the Jewish counter-model to Egyptian "political theology", as analyzed by Assmann, but in both cases, the pre-axial past—an object of demarcation in the latter case, reappropriation in the former—is a part of

[41] Ibid., 104.

[42] See Jan Assmann's contribution in this volume.

the interpretive context within which the new paradigm defines itself, and its relative significance is not settled once and for all. The Greek case was different again, and here we can speak of two constitutive pasts: the vanished past of the Mycenaean world and the living past of the Near Eastern civilizations, re-encountered at the beginning of the Axial Age (eighth century BCE). The Mycenaean past was transfigured into a part of the religious universe: the "heroic" complement to the divine world, whose presence had a significant effect on the relationship between humans and gods; as for the Near Eastern cultures, an extensive appropriation of their skills, inventions and—to some extent—ideas was crucial to the civilizing process that took off in Archaic Greece, but at the same time, the most distinctive Greek creation—the *polis*—emerged in explicit and radical contrast to the Near Eastern patterns of political life. As for India, everything is more obscure, but it seems beyond doubt that a significant legacy was left by the Indus civilization.

2. There is another—structural rather than interpretive—side to the relationship between axial and pre-axial civilizations. Eisenstadt is, of course, well aware of the varying "political-ecological settings of societies"[43] and includes them among the "conditions of emergence and institutionalization of Axial Age civilizations", but it could be argued that a particular political-ecological constellation should figure more prominently in the model than it has hitherto done. As noted above, the best-known axial transformations took place in environments shaped—in a long-term perspective—by momentous events of the Late Bronze Age: crises which weakened or destroyed civilizational centres and upset the power balance between centres and peripheries. The connection is most visible around the Eastern Mediterranean. East of Mesopotamia, a crisis occurred at an earlier date and led to a more complete collapse of urban civilization; both Zoroastrianism and Vedic religion emerged in socio-cultural settings conditioned by that background. In China, events seem to have taken a different course. A crisis around 1100 BCE resulted in the takeover of the Shang state and/or state system (I take it that this is still a matter of controversy among historians and archeologists) by the Zhou dynasty. A peripheral state conquered the erstwhile civilizational centre and proceeded to restructure its religious

[43] Eisenstadt (1986), 19.

and political framework in significant ways. There is, as far as I can judge, no parallel elsewhere. Conquests by peripheral forces in the Near East were abortive, at least from the civilizational point of view (Kassites in Babylonia, Hyksos in Egypt); for an imaginary parallel, we might think of the Hittite invasion of Mesopotamia (sixteenth century BCE) culminating in a takeover; it is debatable whether we should put the Assyrian Empire (as coming from an internal periphery of Mesopotamia) in this category, and in any case, it failed to achieve definitive control over Babylonia (the Achaemenid Empire belongs to another epoch). The Zhou conquest may thus have set the scene for a sequence of transformations which differed from axial trajectories in the Mediterranean-Mesopotamian-Iranian-Indian part of Eurasia.

3. In this context, we should reconsider the question of a common denominator—a shared set of cultural premises—for the axial breakthroughs. As noted above, the distinction between the transcendental and the mundane raises some questions of interpretation. More ambiguities emerge when it is linked to historical settings: the two levels of order relate to each other in different ways in the various axial traditions, and the meaning lent to their relationship depends on the overall logic of the respective worldview. Eisenstadt hints at this aspect of the problematic: "The general tendency to reconstruct the world with all its symbolic-ideological and institutional repercussions was common to all the post-Axial Age civilizations."[44] The central distinction would, on this view, be one—admittedly crucial, but not self-defining—aspect of a broader articulation of the world. I have already singled out the "mise en forme du monde" (Merleau-Ponty) and the correlative visions of human being-in-the-world as a central but still neglected theme of civilizational theory; given the state of the debate, it may be more useful to explore the implications of arguments that have touched upon this issue from one angle or another, than to attempt a direct and systematic analysis.

Two concepts used by Jan Assmann, *cosmotheism* and *negative cosmology*, seem relevant to our purposes. "Cosmotheism" is, at least in the present context, the more fundamental of the two categories.[45] It is introduced in order to relativize the common but misleading

[44] Ibid., 15.
[45] See Assmann (1996), 232-42, and (1991), 59-75.

dichotomy of monotheism and polytheism, and to highlight the specific characteristics of the religious imagination in early civilizations. The emphasis is on a twofold shift in religious consciousness: on the one hand, civilizations develop—in comparison with tribal societies and religions—more emphatic and structured sacralizing visions of the world, expressed in images of order, but on the other hand, they articulate—in connection with sacred kingship—stronger notions of divine guidance and authority as guarantees of a persisting world order. Cosmotheism, then, is the synthesis of these two strands. If it is a combination, it is easier to understand that it lends itself to varying interpretations. With regard to the Egyptian case, Assmann distinguishes three versions: the primary polytheistic conception of a plurality of gods involved in the maintenance of world order; the revolutionary monotheism of Akhenaten's new religion; and a pantheism which sees the highest god as the embodiment of the cosmos and of all other divinities. Akhenaten's new religion failed, but from a comparative viewpoint, it is important because it exemplifies the possibility of monotheism within a cosmotheistic framework. As for the monotheistic tradition that began in ancient Israel, the decisive innovation was not the idea of one exclusive god, but that of a trans-cosmic one, and—concomitantly—the emphasis on revelation, rather than on the "cosmo-hermeneutical" communication between human and divine worlds.

It seems to me that a comparison with other cases might bring to light other variants of the cosmotheistic pattern. Most obviously, it is possible to strengthen the aspect of impersonal order against the more or less massively anthropomorphic conception of the gods; this road was taken, across different intermediary stages and with different long-term results, in Greece and China (in China, it was—as L. Vandermeersch has shown—associated with an exceptionally elaborate version of cosmo-hermeneutics: the "divinatory imaginary").[46]

But the mutations of cosmotheism might be better understood in connection with the other concept mentioned above. Assmann's reference to negative cosmology in the Egyptian context was quoted in the second section of the paper; if we define the concept in general terms (as an awareness, however implicit, of the irreducibility

[46] See Vandermeersch (1992).

of the world to order), it seems a plausible assumption that it is present in all traditions, and open to different interpretations as well as to combinations with changing models of order. It is tempting to speculate about the role of such themes in the axial traditions. We could, for example, suggest a connection with Jan Heesterman's analysis of the Vedic sacrifice and its reinterpretation, which he sees as the starting-point for the axial transformation in India.[47] From a reproduction of the "primordial act of creation", the sacrifice develops into a ritual system concerned with the perfection of its order and divorced from the world. The result is a definitive "split between the transcendent order of ritual and the unreformed sphere of social life."[48] A strong dose of negative cosmology is incorporated into the definition of the mundane sphere. But the dialectic of the two spheres does not stop there: further sublimation of the transcendent order is achieved through an increasingly radical negation of the whole mundane realm. Negative cosmology translates into an affirmation of transcendence. Another case in point is the Daoist current during China's Axial Age: its most distinctive formulations could be seen as elaborations of negative cosmology, against the rationalizing, humanizing and statist models of order.

4. If there are still questions to be asked about the cultural premises of the axial transformations, the same applies to the power structures with which they are intertwined. Eisenstadt suggests a particular connection with the political sphere: "in all Axial civilizations, there.. took place a far-reaching reordering rooted in the conception of the relation between the political and the higher transcendental order."[49] A general centrality of the political order should thus be distinguished from the specific privileged role attributed to political power in some axial civilizations (where the political sphere becomes, in Eisenstadt's view, a key part of a this-worldly resolution of the tensions inherent in the new visions of order—this applies especially to China); and conversely, some cases may be characterized by an atypical attenuation of this link (Eisenstadt speaks of a "weak connection" between philosophical exploration and political reconstruction in Greece). The general logic of axial break-

[47] Heesterman, "Ritual, revelation and Axial Age", in Eisenstadt (1986), pp. 393-406.

[48] Ibid., 399.

[49] Eisenstadt (1986), 8.

throughs leads to a new understanding of rulership: "The King-God, the embodiment of the cosmic and earthly order alike, disappeared, and a secular ruler, in principle accountable to some higher order, appeared."[50] Let us note in passing that this formulation appears to equate sacred kingship with its most emphatic form: the terms quoted above are clearly more applicable to Egypt than to Mesopotamia, and the question of accountability—as an innovation—would have to be posed in more nuanced terms. But here I am interested in a more general problem. If there is an essential connection between axial breakthroughs and new patterns of political life, this means that we have to link the comparative analysis of axial traditions to a similarly comparative theory of state formation. Here I will limit myself to two sets of remarks on this problematic.

First, Eisenstadt's model of the axial transformation makes some—more or less explicit—claims about the relationship of the new cultural horizons to the dynamics of power structures. More precisely, it seems to stress the double-edged character of the cultural innovations—indeed a triple ambiguity: a) the axial visions give rise to more ambitious and elaborate ways of *legitimating* more complex and expansive power structures, but they are—although not all in the same fashion or to the same degree—also conducive to a more critical stance which makes the rulers *accountable* to higher instances or principles; b) the axial transformation broadens the *cognitive horizon* and therefore the *strategic scope* of power centres and elites, but the growing quantity and diversity of cognitive resources is at the same time an *obstacle to the monopolization of power*; c) this results in the simultaneous (but unequal) development of *power structures* and of *protest movements*, both of which draw on the axial sources.

On the other hand, it can be argued that the theory of axial transformations has as yet paid too little attention to the interaction between cultural breakthroughs and the autonomous processes of state formation (Eisenstadt tends to subsume the problematic of state formation under the question of elite strategies and coalitions). From this point of view (and as a first step), two different constellations may be distinguished. In Greece and China, the axial turn took place in close connection with particularly distinctive processes of state formation, but of a very different kind: in China the monopolizing

[50] Ibid., 8.

dynamic was exceptionally strong (following Mark Elvin, it might be suggested that the first developmental states emerged during the period of the Warring States, early fifth to late third century BCE); in Greece, the process of state formation was uniquely self-limiting, oriented towards a fusion of the state with the political community and a systematic minimization of monopolizing trends). The axial transformations of thought and culture can be analyzed in terms of their responses and contributions to these respective developments. By contrast, the Jewish and Indian cases were characterized by a striking fragility and discontinuity of political centres (albeit on a hugely different scale), and also by strong cultural countercurrents to state-building that did not translate into political strategies of self-limitation (as suggested above, there are parallels between ancient Greece and ancient Israel, but in the latter case, the main expression of the self-limiting logic was religious rather than political). But the long-term implications for civilizational identity and cohesion were different: in the Jewish case, structural fragility prevented the consolidation of a fully fledged civilizational complex (what emerged was a diasporic civilizational pattern); in India, civilizational identity and unity proved compatible with political fragmentation.

To sum up, Eisenstadt's outline of a historical sociology of the Axial Age marks a new round of the debate. His conception of a "breakthrough" to new civilizational patterns is—as I have argued—open to critical questions, some of which are linked with those raised above with reference to Jaspers. Nevertheless, it represents the only systematic project of its kind, and is an indispensable guide to further exploration of the field.[51] The various contributions to this book will indicate ways of moving towards a more balanced combination of theoretical and historical perspectives.

[51] For a different approach to Eisenstadt's problematic, see Breuer (1994). Here the key cases of axial transformations are re-examined in light of a more rigorously defined model of ontological contrasts between two levels of order; the result is a more sceptical account of the Axial Age, a much more qualified interpretation of the break with archaic cultural patterns, and a very restrictive model of radical "axiality" (the Sophistic movement appears as the most clear-cut case, but its direct socio-cultural impact was limited and short-lived).

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THE MEANING OF THE AXIAL AGE

BJÖRN WITTROCK

The idea of the Axial Age was explicitly proposed or implicitly suggested by some of the most prominent social scientists and thinkers of the twentieth century, including Alfred and Max Weber, Karl Jaspers, Eric Voegelin and S.N. Eisenstadt.[1] It is to date the most ambitious effort to understand one of the most important transformations in world history. This is the appearance, with relative simultaneity in high cultures of Eurasia in the centuries around the middle of the first millennium BCE, of new forms of reflexivity and historical consciousness. A profound ontological change marked, or so the proponents of the idea of the Axial Age argue, a new chapter in the history of humanity characterized by a new sense of the potentials for humans to change the world, to act and to reach beyond the limits of the immediately given and taken for granted.

These cultural transformations were related to macro-institutional transformations, including the emergence of the great world religions and of new political orders, often of imperial nature. The idea of the Axial Age has been the object of scholarly debate at least since the 1940's but has also been widely diffused through popular writings on global history and religion. The present volume is a reassessment of the standing of this theory in the light of recent advances in historical scholarship across a range of fields. My own contribution has a threefold objective. It examines the meaning of the Axial Age in three senses.

Firstly, it accepts the notion that any understanding of meaning must be contextual. Thus it wants to set the stage for an interpretation of the sense of the idea within the context of the development of historiography and social science in the course of the nineteenth

[1] For an outline of a conceptual history see Johann Arnason's contribution to this volume.

and twentieth centuries. It highlights the processes that lead to a sharp decline of interest in historical research within the social sciences and to a similar decline of interest in global history within the discipline of history. It is only relatively recently that the combined effects of these developments are addressed with the emergence of sustained long-range research programs.

Secondly, against this background, an explication and definition of the concept of the Axial Age is put forward. One ambition is to make a demarcation that reflects the usage of key thinkers, in particular Karl Jaspers, in this intellectual tradition. Most of all the ambition is to achieve a demarcation that is conceptually clear and analytically useful. I argue that the Axial Age involved shifts along basic dimensions of human existence that we may describe as changes in terms of reflexivity, historicity and agentiality—and in this respect it is of course reminiscent of the transformations that we associate with the formation of our own modernity. Indeed, it is for this reason that an analysis of the Axial Age is important not only to historians but also to social scientists and, in the last instance, to anybody trying to grasp shifts in the dimensions of human existence whether historically or today.

The Axial Age constitutes one of the most important cultural crystallizations in global history with consequences for all subsequent developments. I argue for a delimitation that I believe is not only fruitful but necessary in order to avoid an all too common tendency to narrowly link the term to characteristics of a single civilization and hence make that civilization an implicit model in a form of teleological global competition.

Thirdly, I elaborate on the importance of avoiding a teleological analysis of the Axial Age. I do so by exploring the institutional implications of the cultural and cosmological shift that the Axial Age involved. I argue that there are five distinct paths of institutional development, each one premised on, but not dependent upon in a one-to-one relationship, a set of cultural and cosmological assumptions. A key feature in these processes is the existence of arenas for cultural and intellectual contestation.

History, Social Science and the European Experience

The formation of modernity in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth century entailed a deep transformation of political and eco-

nomic order. Both social scientists and social historians have tended to cast the constitution of modernity in terms of dual, interlinked, transformations in socio-economic and political practices. Terms such as "the industrial revolution" and "the democratic revolution" are just two examples of this type of conceptualization which ranges from functionalist ways of theorizing to Weberian and Marxian ones. What they have in common is a disregard for the fact that the formation of modernity also involved a profound change in the nature of discursive practices. These discursive transformations were not mere "ideological" epiphenomena. They were deep-seated epistemic and ontological ruptures and redefinitions, which opened up new horizons of expectations and hopes. These shifts made possible or, more literally, conceivable, if only as projects and imaginations, new institutional practices.

One important element in the profound change in the nature of discursive practices concerned the ordering of forms of knowledge. Thus natural philosophy gradually gave way to a range of natural science disciplines. Moral philosophy was slowly transformed into a range of separate discourses, the social sciences, that in the course of the nineteenth century became increasingly distinct relative both to natural science and to literary discourse. In this process of radical epistemic change, historical reasoning, which had formed a central component of moral philosophy, came to form a discursive realm of its own, separate from philosophy and separate from the social sciences.[2]

Simultaneously, the type of critical historical reflection on the European political experience relative to that of other parts of the world, and in particular that of East Asia and China and which was most closely associated with Voltaire, disappeared. In its stead came first a distinctly Eurocentric conception of world history with Hegel's lectures on the philosophy of history as an emblematic expression. History emerged later as an academic discipline with its focus on the European experience of the formation of a range of nation states.[3] In its formative stage in the early nineteenth century, in the foun-

[2] See Heilbron (1995), Heilbron (et al) (1998) but also Brian (1994), Fox (et al) (1995), Lepenies (1988), and Wokler (1987).

[3] The argument about the formation of modernity entailed an abandonment of universalistic commitment inherent in the Enlightenment. This has in recent years been pursued perhaps most vigourously by Robert Wokler, see Wokler (1998).

dational works of Ranke, the main theme was the shaping of Europe through the confluence of the cultural traditions of Latin and Germanic peoples.[4] Later most European historians would narrow their focus further and write narratives about the trajectories of individual nations. Sometimes these studies, as in majestic works at turn of the nineteenth century by Meinecke and Hintze, had a strong comparative perspective, sometimes their orientation was limited to the achievements of one particular nation.

In the late nineteenth century, at a period in time when European global pre-eminence was at its peak, history largely came to be a scholarly exercise that served as a discursive parallel to the formation or reform of European nation states. The new investigations of social conditions and the back side of processes of industrialization, urbanization and modernization were to become institutionally embedded, if in a slow and uneven process, in the research-orientated universities and other new higher education institutions.[5] They formed an analogous parallel to the efforts of those nation states to cope with "the social question". Thus the relationship of the new social sciences to an historical conception, other than that which took the "life" of a given nation state as its starting point, could not be but a tenuous one.[6] The notion that the European experience should not be understood to be the self-evident yardstick for the achievements of a civilization was even more remote. To some extent the same can be said of the intellectual giants of early social science, including Max Weber. Thus even if Weber's most seminal works, such as his collected essays on the world religions, are masterpieces of global history, they stand in a complex and never quite resolved tension to other parts of his works. In the interpretation of his legacy for future generations of social scientists, as handed down most prominently perhaps by Talcott Parsons, these latter parts, emphasizing the unique nature of Western modernity and its his-

[4] A particularly succinct essay on Ranke's formative role is Gilbert (1990).

[5] Wittrock and Wagner (1992) and (1996). See also Rothblatt and Wittrock (1993).

[6] The argument in this section is largely based on a long-term research programme with results published in Heilbron (et al) (1998), Wagner (et al) (1990), Wagner (et al) (1991), Wagner (1999 and 2001), Wittrock and Wagner (1992) and (1996), Wittrock (1998, 1999, 2000, 2001 and 2003). An analogous line of argumentation is pursued in Wallerstein (et al) (1996). For a discussion of the role of universities in this process see Rothblatt and Wittrock (1993).

torical trajectory, became the most visible and most frequently cited ones.[7]

It was not in Europe, however, that a full-blown professional separation between what had previously been a broadly conceived movement of social science into a range of individual social science disciplines took place. This occurred in the United States at the turn of the nineteenth century. One of its consequences was a more secure professional position for the practitioners of these forms of scholarship. Another one, however, was the emergence of a widening chasm between on the one hand history and on the other hand different social science disciplines such as sociology and political science. A corresponding development did not take place in most European countries until well after the Second World War. There can be little doubt that in the wake of this development an interest in history, and particularly an interest in global history, came to occupy a less prominent part within the newly differentiated social science disciplines than had previously been the case. In a number of European countries, political and sociological studies had from the mid-nineteenth century onwards remained intimately linked to historical research. However the focus had, as argued above, been on the development of a national polity rather than on global developments.

The Rediscovery and Rejection of Global History

It was only the disaster of the First World War, which came to shake the conviction of a historically assured pre-eminence of Europe in particular and a more vaguely defined Western world in general. In the wake of the War, a first wave of efforts appeared to write the history not of civilization but of the rise and decline of different civilizations, accounts in which the achievements and predominance of Europe were cast in serious doubt. Often enough, such accounts were written from the perspective of a generalized conservative cultural pessimism. In one form this is true of Spengler, in an abstracted and radicalized form it is characteristic of Heidegger's pro-

[7] This also entailed that an alternative, more historical, interpretation as propounded by Reinhard Bendix came to play a less prominent role, as did Bendix' own magnum opus, *Kings or People*.

grammatic writings from the late 1920's and early 1930's. In other cases, authors transcended those conventions and tried to reflect upon the cultural foundations of different political and societal orders from the vantage point of an historical scholarship characterized by the highest degrees of critical reflexivity. This is to some extent the case in the philosophical writings of Jaspers. It is even more tangible in the historical writings of such diverse authors as Marc Bloch, Franz Borkenau, and Arnold Toynbee. In their writings one may discern the outlines and the scholarly promise of a social science that brings in a comparative and critical account of world history.

However, these potentials were not the ones that became predominant or were realized when social science finally became institutionalized across the board in the 1950's and 1960's. Rather this occurred in the particularly ahistorical form of social science that had long been predominant in the United States and was exported after the Second World War, linked to the notion of the so-called behavioral revolution. These efforts were often promoted within the framework of the new international social science associations that had been established with links to UNESCO and other forms of international scientific collaboration, shaped by the United States.[8] Thus social science not only became less historical than it tended to be in most parts of Europe at the turn of the century. It also became shaped by the fact that social science disciplines, and most notably so perhaps political science and sociology, in their theoretical core came to reflect the pre-eminent position of the United States in the post-Second World War world.

Nowhere it this more obvious than in the curtailed form of theorizing about world history that came to be known as modernization theory. This type of theorizing was explicitly premised on a view of world history cast in terms of a set of dichotomies between the traditional and the modern, the Western and the non-western, the rural and the urban, the stagnant and the dynamic. Implicitly it tended to be premised on a view of the world in which the particular experiences of one country, notably the United States, were taken as the yardstick against which the achievements and failures of other countries were measured.

[8] For an overview of these developments see Wagner (et al) (1990) and Wagner (1999).

Thus even if social science, in its own long-standing self-conception, remained a discourse of modernity, these presuppositions tended to entail a social science that was reticent to theorize either world history at large and even those upheavals that came to constitute the particular Western trajectory. Thus the particular Western trajectory to modernity tended to be assumed rather than examined. Furthermore, the relationship of a European trajectory to global historical developments tended to be ignored or simply dismissed. These types of questions, so prominent in earlier and overtaken forms of philosophy of history, were simply irrelevant to the behavioral sciences of modern industrial societies and their increasingly urbanized and differentiated forms of organized social life.

Within the discipline of history, a gradual process of disciplinary demarcation led to analogous results. Thus scholars, to whom questions of world history had been a central concern tended to lose their standing as exemplars and be regarded as falling outside of the bounds of the discipline and rather occupying a role as outsiders. As such they might be interesting perhaps but ultimately they were seen as failing to conform to proper standards of modern historical science. Arnold Toynbee is an obvious case in point, and despite his strenuous efforts to argue for the empirical and scholarly basis of his writing of history he was often depicted as a speculative writer. In other cases, such as that of Franz Borkenau, their works have simply fallen into relative oblivion. These scholars appeared as hopelessly overtaken in methodological terms long before the era of the behavioral revolution of the 1950's and 1960's, an event that further contributed to their neglect, as did in some cases their different political allegiances.

Global interactions have become so prominent and so immediately visible as to make obvious the existence of distinctly modern, yet clearly different, societies also across the globe.[9] No longer is it possible to credibly argue that different cultural, religious and historical traditions will become increasing irrelevant and eventually fade away in favor of one all-encompassing form of modernity and modernization. It is in this context that there are renewed efforts to understand the different civilizational legacies and to explore vari-

[9] An exemplary introduction to debates on globalization is Held and McGrew (2000).

ous modes of interactions over long periods of time. Within social science this renewed interest often has come under the label of studies of globalization. Paradoxically, globalization studies often seem premised on assumptions close to those of earlier forms of theorizing about convergence and modernization. They describe the global and all but inevitable diffusion and impact of market interactions and capitalist forms of production.

In so doing, they highlight a major antinomy in modernization theory. Thus this type of theory started from a description of West European or North American societies and then traced processes that would lead to the global diffusion of key characteristics of these societies. To the extent that such studies had demarcated what were the defining characteristics of modernity, there was however nothing *per se* that would guarantee, the continued geographical preeminence of Western Europe and North America. Clearly, if modernization theory was taken to its logical conclusion there were no obvious reasons why European or North American societies might not be challenged and overtaken by late-comers in other parts of the world. The failure to draw this conclusion on the part of proponents of modernization theory is indicative of their inability to tell clearly what features of Western societies were the defining ones of a modern society and which were just historically accidental.

Present day globalization studies and theories about global networks are in conceptual terms strangely reminiscent of modernization theory. Notions of structures may be replaced by those of networks, and Eurocentrism by globalizm. However core assumptions of earlier modernization theory in the form of a functional evolutionary account of history and a functional and non-agential account of society is remarkably familiar.

In historical research the renewed interest has taken the form of an interest in what is often termed global history. What holds this wide area together is essentially an insistence, from a variety of different perspectives, on the legitimacy and scholarly viability of asking questions about long-term developments that transcend the borders of any given polity, or indeed geographical region. The empirical basis of such studies are of course ultimately the same as those of historical studies at large and will in one form or the other draw upon archival research of primary sources.

However if the requirement is made that it is only those studies

that are exclusively based on primary archival research by a given author that should enjoy scholarly legitimacy, then global history will be ruled out by definition. Highly respected historians have in all times conducted studies that go beyond the prohibitions of such a rule. Thus the relevant question is not so much whether global history is a legitimate scholarly pursuit or not but rather how criteria of adequacy can be articulated and what might satisfy a requirement for justification of some particular account.[10]

This, indeed, is a process well under way among historians on a worldwide scale. In this process, it is clearly the case that historians seek forms of engagement with questions of global history that will not commit them to a representation of the world in terms of the interaction of a number of states and polities, nor of cohesive civilizational blocs. Rather there is a quest for more sensitive modes of representation that highlight cultural and institutional legacies that are shared across such boundaries. Terms such as "connections" and "encounters" recur frequently. This is true of the master of global history, William McNeill, and an analogous form of analysis pervades the works of the intellectual pioneer in this field, Marshall Hodgson.[11] It is also true, to take but two recent examples, of Sanjay Subrahmanyam and his notion of "connected histories" across the Eurasian landmass from the fourteenth to the seventeenth centuries and of Jerry Bentley and his focus on cultural "encounters" on a hemispheric scale.[12] Similarly a group of scholars at the Institute for Advanced Study in Berlin have tried to spell out the "entangled histories" of different parts of the world in the age of modernity. It is difficult, for scholarly and maybe also for normative reasons, to not harbor a certain affinity for these efforts. They seem to hold every promise to yield important insights. However, they do not relieve us of the need to go beyond a mere amassing of interesting insights in the hope that we might eventually be able to discern the contours

[10] For a set of contributions to this debate see Engelstad and Kalleberg (1999).

[11] This is the case already in his early standard works, originally published in 1963 and 1967 respectively with later editions (McNeill, 1991 and 1999 respectively) but also in his shorter essays, McNeill (2000). Hodgson's posthumous collection of essays (Hodgson, 1993) is a monument to this kind of thinking about global history.

[12] Subrahmanyam (1997) and (1998); Bentley (1993) and (1998). For an overview of the treatment of global history, which served as the first major theme at the recent, 19th International Congress of Historical Sciences, see O'Brien (2000).

of global historical developments. This is the point where social theory must confront global history.

These developments in the social and historical sciences have, as indicated in the opening paragraph of this chapter, entailed reconsideration of the context of social science's formative period.[13] Furthermore, it seems clear that core assumptions of social theory must themselves be re-examined. Maybe most importantly, social theory must provide an account of global historical developments that is less constrained and biased than modernization theory, even in the new garb of globalization studies, but significantly more elaborate in conceptual terms than current contributions to global history.

One necessary condition is to elaborate an account that explores links between social history and history of consciousness. This is valid for a study of the period of transformations in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries but also for a study of earlier periods of global, or hemispheric wide, transformations. In other contexts I have outlined a way to conceptualize the formation of modernity in Europe that makes it possible to link conceptual change to processes of socio-political transformations and upheavals. I have argued that the formation of modernity cannot, as in most standard social science accounts, just be cast in terms of socio-economic-political transformations, with conceptual changes relegated to the role of "ideological" epiphenomena. On the contrary, epistemic and conceptual changes involved an intensified process of reflexivity and fundamentally new conceptualizations of the location of human beings in time, historicity, and of the capacity of human beings to bring about changes in the world, agency. Such shifts made new forms of institutions and practices, including the modern nation state and a modern civil society, meaningful and possible, and indeed conceivable. They also entailed foci for further elaboration and contestation as well as standards that exclude certain actions from the realm of the culturally constitutive and permissible.

It is in this sense that, contrary to what most social science accounts stipulate, the formation of modernity cannot be meaningfully understood only in terms of a structural and institutional transformation. It is a deep-seated cultural crystallization. As such it may

[13] An early effort of my own in this direction is the volume Wagner et al (1991), another one Heilbron (et al) (1998).

also be analyzed in relation to other processes of cultural crystallization in global history, in particular to what one of the great phenomenologists of the last century, Karl Jaspers, has termed the Axial Age ("Achsenzeit").

The present volume has an empirical focus on this key process in global history. It is also, in my understanding, a contribution to a more well-informed account of global history and one that is of direct relevance also for the social sciences. In this essay I want to briefly elaborate on some of the conditions for such a research programme for the study of processes of cultural crystallization in global history, be they the Axial Age or the constitution of modernity or the period in the eleventh to thirteenth centuries, when some of the major trajectories across Eurasia were being reasserted or fundamentally transformed, something that will be explored in yet another volume. Already in this contribution, however, I shall argue, that it is important to engage in an effort to arrive at a synthetic formulation, no matter how tentative and open to criticism, of global processes of cultural crystallization and macro institutional change. In the sequel, I shall outline how such a program might proceed in its initial stages.

The Idea of the Axial Age

One step in the elaboration of the research program indicated above might indeed be to examine some lineages in scholarship, that constitute what may never have been a mainstream trend. Although they are in some cases all but forgotten a number of traditions in social thought and historical scholarship may prove to be exceptionally profitable from a wider perspective. One such important existing tradition of great relevance to a reconstructive research program in social theory and global history is the one that is often associated with a work of Karl Jaspers. In the book, *Vom Urspung und Ziel der Geschichte* (published in 1949; English translation, *The Origin and Goal of History*, in 1953), he expressed the idea that our understanding of history, indeed the very origin of history, is related to the emergence and institutionalization of forms of critical reflexivity. Needless to say, it is, to some extent, an arbitrary decision whether that moment is associated with the most basic human activities in the form of the emergence of language itself or with some other form of human articulation. Jaspers argued that the emergence and institutionaliza-

tion of critical reflexivity is associated with the emergence of forms of thought that clearly transcend activities associated with the daily lives and needs of human beings. Thus it has to be possible to identify the expression of forms of thinking that involve an explicit formulation of ideas about human life beyond the constraints of existence as it looks at a specific time and place.

In other words, Jaspers believed that the distinctive feature in the emergence of human history, as opposed to the evolution of the human species, is the manifestation of a specific capacity. This was the capacity of human beings to reflect upon and to give expression to an image of the world as having the potential of being different from what it was perceived to be here and now. The emergence of such images of the world, based on critical reflection, marked, in Jaspers' classical formulation (1949), the transition from *Mythos* to *Logos*, a breakthrough in critical reflexivity and, indeed, the emergence of history in the sense of the epoch in human existence characterized by a reflexive, historical consciousness.[14] He termed this period the Axial Age. In temporal terms he located it in the centuries around the middle of the first millennium BC.

The idea of the Axial Age, as outlined by Karl Jaspers, had the character of a bold idea briefly sketched. The same is true of analogous formulations by Alfred Weber and Eric Voegelin. In the 1970's this idea was taken up the Harvard sinologist Benjamin Schwartz and a group of prominent scholars, including Peter Brown, Louis Dumont, Eric Weil and Robert Darnton, in a special issue of the journal *Daedalus*, devoted to the theme "Wisdom, Revelation, and Doubt: Perspectives on The First Millennium BC".[15] The idea was explored later and elaborated by S.N. Eisenstadt who, with Wolfgang Schluchter as the other principal investigator, made it the focus of a sustained research program. In collaboration with a large number of historians and linguists Eisenstadt extended the analysis considerably and systematically related it to recent advances in historical scholarship.

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[14] In fact, Jaspers' notion was not altogether different from the one Hegel proposed in his lectures on the philosophy of history, although in Hegel's case the ascription, as in the case of Iran, and denial—as in his statement that India does not have a history—of such a capacity was heavily imbued with an empirical bias that cannot but be called Eurocentric.

[15] *Daedalus* 104(2), Spring 1975.

For all its remaining openness, this theory—or rather this hypothesis—of the Axial Age is to date the most ambitious and encompassing one that outlines the key features of a first global cultural crystallization. It has, without achieving universal acclaim but also without being convincingly refuted, been the subject of two decades of intense scholarly debate involving ancient historians, historians of religion and philosophy, and linguists.[16] The current volume is an effort to take stock of this debate. My own ambition in this essay is to advance an understanding of the notion of axiality that makes it possible to relate it to some of the key problems in present-day historically orientated scholarship on major transformations of societies and, indeed, civilizational legacies. As already indicated, I am convinced that a purely structural and institutional analysis is grossly inadequate for this purpose.

The concept of the Axial Age encompasses deep-seated intellectual and cosmological shifts that occurred in different forms but with striking, if relative, simultaneity, across the Eurasian hemisphere. These shifts were manifested in such different forms as the thought of Confucius and, two centuries later, Mencius in China, Buddha in India, the Hebrew prophetical movement and the classical age in Greek philosophy. Neither in the early formulations of Jaspers, nor in the more recent ones by scholars, collaborating with S.N. Eisenstadt, has there been an entirely successful effort to relate these cosmological shifts to other types of human activities. Maybe the most important direction in future research directions is to spell out the links between the set of intellectual and cosmological breakthroughs, that the concept of the Axial Age in a limited sense of the word denotes, and radical institutional transformations.

These are *firstly* the formation of the great world religions. This transformation is a consequence of the Axial Age but not an immediate and direct one. It only manifests itself in the form of a series of cultural encounters with ensuing articulations that synthesize cosmological elements from different and previously distinct civilizational traditions. Furthermore, the hemispheric-wide diffusion of these articulations in the form of world religions is in practical terms premised on a second transformation of the widest consequence,

[16] Among these publications the following ones may be specially mentioned, viz Eisenstadt (1982), (1986), (1987 a and b), and (1992a, b and c), (1998), and (1999), as well as Eisenstadt (et al) (2001) and Schluchter (1996).

namely the emergence of a number of imperial political orders across the Eurasian hemisphere. This development, *thirdly*, also makes possible the consolidation of hemispheric-wide trade routes over land linking the Far West and the Far East. Thus the establishment of what nineteenth century historians came to call the Silk Route was stimulated by the meeting of Sinic and Hellenistic cultures in Central Asia, and the concomitant Western extension of control by the Han empire. *Fourthly*, there also occurs, in direct conjunction with the last two transformations, a path-breaking change in the institutionalization of warfare and military organization. In this process, the Iranian imperial policies of the Parthians and Sassanians play the foremost role.

The concept of the Axial Age in a wider sense encompasses also these macro-institutional transformations. In other words, a profound cultural crystallization—the dimensions of which refer to the imagination and representation of human existence—involved not just a process of cultural reconfiguration. It also meant the formation of culturally entrenched structuring principles for macro-institutions.

Such a conceptualization of the Axial Age stands in a striking relationship of analogy in analytical terms to accounts of the formation of modernity. More precisely this is valid for such accounts that emphasize that the formation of modernity cannot be reduced to the processes of transformation in political and economic practices that are referred to by terms such as the—to use Parsons' terminology—"the democratic revolution" and "the industrial revolution". Instead it has to be located within the context of a deep epistemic and cultural shift as well. It also has to trace historical interactions of ideational and macro-institutional transformations far beyond what has been customary among proponents of historical institutionalism in recent decades.

A rethinking of the formation of modernity has taken place that focuses not only on an industrial and political revolution but also on the parallel revolution in intellectual and cosmological terms.[17] In this revolution, there occurred momentous shifts along dimensions of reflexivity, temporality, agency, and a redefinition of the relationship between immanence and transcendence, as well as modes

[17] Foucault (1966); Koselleck (1979), (1985), (1986), (1987a), (1987b) and (2002); Heilbron (1995), Heilbron et al (1998).

of articulation and linguistic interpretation. This means that it is, indeed, possible to elaborate a conceptual framework that should eventually allow for a recasting and a comparison of the formation of modernity relative to the cultural crystallization of the Axial Age.

In the sequel I shall first of all explicate the meaning of the Axial Age and delineate its key dimensions. I shall then examine three claims that Jaspers saw as consequences of the hypothesis of the Axial Age. They are the claim that the Axial Age constitutes the origin of history in a specific sense, the claim that that the Axial Age ushered in the great world religions, and finally the claim that the Axial Age entailed the emergence of imperial political orders that replaced political entities of a small and fragile nature. I shall argue that none of these statements can be justified in the light of available empirical evidence. It is, however, also clear that none of them follow from the formulation of the idea of an Axial Age that I propose.

Explication and Definition of the Axial Age

The first and most obvious question concerns the meaning of the concept of the Axial Age. We are indebted to Johann Arnason for having provided a brief conceptual history and a critical discussion of the uses of the term. My own view is that it is only with Karl Jaspers' *The Origin and Goal of History* that a reasonably clear delineation of the meaning of the concept is proposed. It is this conceptualization that serves as a basis and starting point for the subsequent elaboration of the hypothesis, something that for instance Benjamin Schwartz is explicit about in his classic introductory article to the 1975 issue of *Daedalus*. Jaspers' empirical statements about the momentous change that he associated with the Axial Age may, as Arnason points out, involve statements that we today, against the background of now available knowledge, see as no longer tenable. However, Jaspers' conceptual delineation of the idea of the Axial Age essentially rests on an assertion about a limited number of dimensions that are crucial in human existence.

In my view, Jaspers' position rests on the assumption that in the centuries around the middle of the first millennium BC a major shift occurred in the way reflectively articulate human beings in some of the high cultures in the Eurasian hemisphere reconceptualized their existential position. The breakthrough was manifest in different ways in the different civilizations of the Eurasian landmass. In all its

manifestations it involved dramatic shifts in the following five major dimensions:

Firstly, an increasing human reflexivity and *reflexive consciousness*; this is what Jaspers saw as the most basic feature. It involved the ability to use reason to transcend the immediately given.

Secondly, an increasing *historical consciousness* and an awareness of the temporal location and the limitations of human existence and thereby also a sense of relative contingency.

Thirdly, an increasing awareness of the *malleability* of human existence, of the potentials of *human action* and human agentiality within the bounds of human mundane temporality or, as in the case of Iranian culture, with respect to the relationship between actions in a mundane and a transcendental sphere. Conceptualizations of agentiality tended during the axial transformations to become increasingly premised on what might be termed more individualistic assumptions than had previously been the case.

Fourthly, an elaboration of more reflective cosmologies in terms of either the immanence of human existence or a shift in the direction of the positing of a fundamental and discursively argued separation between a *mundane* and a *transcendental sphere*.

Fifthly, an *articulation* and *interpretation* of such cosmologies in terms not only of their oral mediation but also of their textual *inscription* and the emergence of a set of rules for the authoritative interpretation of such texts. Such processes of codification and standardization inevitably entailed breaches with some previously co-existing set of beliefs and practices. They also entailed the potentials for new interpretative contestations. Thereby, of course, the stage was set not only for the articulation and diffusion of orthodoxy but also for heterodox challenges.

This, I maintain, is the core of the meaning of the Axial Age in its original formulation, and it is this core that has subsequently been elaborated in various ways. It is to my mind important to see that any particular articulation of a position on any of these existential dimensions will inevitably involve assumptions that are contextually bound and culturally specific. It would for instance be illegitimate to tie the meaning of the Axial Age to an insistence on the occurrence of some specific cosmology, say one that had been premised on notions of transcendence as opposed to immanence, or on some specific account of the dramatic increase in historical consciousness that we associate with the Axial Age.

What is not culturally specific is the idea that the Axial Age is a period of deep change on fundamental dimensions of human existence—*reflexivity, historicity and agentiality*. This change, furthermore, exhibits great variations in different parts of Eurasia, but it universally entails increasing reflexivity, historicality and agentiality.

The change is broadly contemporaneous across vast regions of the Old World. The Axial Age is then an epoch, but not the only one, of a profound cultural crystallization that affects these inevitable existential dimensions in some of the high cultures across Eurasia. These shifts entail the consolidation or the emergence of a set of different cosmologies and make possible a set of different institutional paths of development of lasting importance.

For all contestations about historical accounts, a delimitation of the notion of the Axial Age in this way provides not only a fruitful starting point for the study of global history and for an understanding of its relevance to the social and human sciences at large. It is, I claim, the only possibility of giving the notion of the Axial Age a meaning that does not entail an unjustifiable teleology and some form of cultural imposition.

The Axial Age and the Origin of History

One problematic question, and one which Arnason (in this volume) deals with at some length, is that of the relationship of political and societal formations before and after what is often termed the axial breakthrough. It seems undeniable that Jaspers argues that the Axial Age constitutes the origin of history, in the sense of the history of human beings who have consciously reflected about their own location in temporal and cosmological terms and tried to form their own existence from the vantage point of such reflections. This is an argument that tends to deny the historicity of previous civilizations in a way that cannot be made compatible with available historical research. Here Jaspers is all but echoing Hegel's lectures on world history and Hegel's characterization of India—as opposed to Iran—as a non-historic civilization precisely because India was, as seen by Hegel, lacking a form of reflection that would involve a critical stance towards its own traditions and the possibility of their transcendence.

To the contrary of what Jaspers asserts, several of the contributors to this volume highlight the fact that in both China, Greece and the Near East a key factor behind the dramatic increase in reflex-

ivity and critical discussion may have been precisely the breakdown of the established practices and assumptions prevailing in earlier civilizations. Whether we look at Egypt, Greece, Mesopotamia or China of the Shang and Zhou Empires, it is simply not possible to defend what Jaspers appears to assert, namely that these civilizations somehow fall outside of history, even in the specific sense of the word employed by Jaspers himself.

The important question is rather to what extent the axial transformations did or did not involve continuities relative to these earlier civilizations. Maybe the most fruitful way to approach this problematique is to focus on the relationship between two types of components, namely firstly the interpretation and redefinition by key Axial Age writers of an imagined legacy of their own societies and civilizations, secondly their own linguistic strategies and conceptual innovations that often involve the generalization, or rather universalization, of key characteristics in their interpretations of these traditions. Thus Confucian ethic involves not so much completely new conceptualizations but rather an articulation of tradition, synthetic in its own ways, and the universalization of some of the most important virtues that had traditionally been seen as properties limited to aristocratic strata. In this case, as in several of the others, axiality is a form of reaction to a new type of human condition where neither the structures of kinship and physical proximity, nor those of a self-legitimizing empire, suffice any longer to embed the individual in a context of meaning and familiarity. The emergence of the world religions is also part of this problematique.

The more the Axial Age breakthrough is described in terms of an epochal rupture, the more the relevance of earlier intellectual and institutional traditions is de-emphasized. As a consequence historical and civilizational analysis will be less concerned with the specificity of individual traditions and more with the extent to which a given civilization has or has not achieved an axial breakthrough. This question is directly related to the question of the relationship between the Axial Age as a cultural and cosmological shift on the one hand and institutional transformations of religious and political practices on the other.

The Axial Age and the World Religions

A key question is the relationship between the Axial Age and the emergence and diffusion of the great world religions. The idea of such a relationship has been at the core of much reasoning concerning the Axial Age hypothesis. Again, it seems undeniable that the intellectual and ontological shift, described in terms of a breakthrough, has important links to deep-seated shifts in religious practices. It is however also clear that the exact nature of such links in many cases is open to quite different interpretations.

One could say that the articulation and diffusion of Mahayana Buddhism occurred in a complex process of demarcation and synthesis of Indic and later, in artistic and perhaps also in ideational terms, of Hellenistic traditions, as they existed in Bactria, parts of Central Asia but also south of the Hindu Kush. Perhaps Christianity may be described as a kind of secondary breakthrough in the form of a synthesis of shifts in Hebrew and Greek Axial transformations. Maybe even Islam can be seen as a distant echo of the early axial transformations, if occurring a millennium later. However, neither Mahayana Buddhism, nor Christianity emerges as a widely diffused "world" religion until the fourth to sixth centuries. It was only then that they became closely linked to imperial political orders in the Mediterranean region and in China respectively.

Their subsequent wider diffusion across the North-Western and North-Eastern peripheries of the hemisphere is even more removed from the original Axial Age breakthrough. In both cases it means that their religious practices become transmuted and intimately interwoven with distinctly non-axial traditions, whether in the form of the nature-orientated pre-Christian religions of the Celtic and Nordic peoples of Europe or the nature-orientated pre-Buddhist religious practices in Korea and Japan.

In all these cases world religions have some sources that are related to axial transformations. However, the further developments of the religions, in terms of processes of standardization, codification and routinization, involve at least as much of processes that tended to stifle the reflexivity, the sense of historical contingency and agential openness that were inherent in the axial transformations.

The Axial Age and the Political Order of Empires

In most interpretations of the Axial Age, a relationship is discerned between the Axial Age as a shift in cosmology and ontology and the emergence of imperial-like political orders. This raises three questions that concern *firstly* the imagined nature of Axial and pre-Axial Age political orders, *secondly* the continuities of such orders and, *thirdly*, the consequences of the axial breakthrough for political orders.

As to the *first* question, clearly, as argued by Arnason, Jaspers' characterization of pre-axial political orders in terms of "small states and cities" is not tenable. It is for instance simply not reasonable to characterize the pre-axial Chinese empires of Western and Eastern Zhou in these terms. There is no reason to deny the obvious fact that many pre-axial political entities exhibit features of an imperial order. This relates directly to the *second* question about continuities. Again, it seems clear that we recognize continuities between pre-axial and axial political orders in different civilizations. Indeed, the political transformations that were possibly stimulated by the axial breakthrough may well be thought of as attempts to preserve or resurrect features of an idealized political order of the past. Again, as already indicated, China, but also Iran, provides examples of just this.

Thirdly, probably the most important question from the point of view of the Axial Age hypothesis concerns the consequences of this axial breakthrough for the emergence of imperial political orders. Basically the problem here is that while such links may be hypothesized in individual cases, the nature of any kind of causation is tenuous at best. At the Western edge of the Eurasian landmass, the rise of the Roman Empire may be coterminous with events that may be associated with axial transformations. However, it would be unreasonable to describe this empire as in any way itself expressing a commitment to an Axial Age cosmology. On the contrary, emerging empires may rather be seen to entail processes of the stifling of the vivid contestation and critique involved in the original axial transformations.

Conversely, the Han Empire may be the clearest example of a relationship between imperial order and philosophical reflection associated with the Axial Age breakthrough. This philosophical reflection, whether in the form expressed by Confucius or Mo or the one later associated with Mencius, occurs against the background

of coterminous political upheavals and may more accurately be seen in the light of efforts to preserve features associated with an earlier imperial tradition than with any kind of cosmological reflection on a chasm between a mundane and transcendental sphere, more accurately as a kind of moral and political philosophy, with a stronger emphasis on the human mind than on transcendental-religious discourse. To some extent, and in a completely different political and societal context, much the same may hold true for Greek philosophy in the same period where a pragmatic attitude and a focus on the life of a polis was often the self-evident starting point for philosophical reflection and debate, not a purported chasm between transcendental and mundane spheres.

Analogously, the Maurya Empire during the reign of Ashoka, and the Achaemenid Empire, may perhaps be depicted as political manifestations of the axial transformation of Buddhism in India and of an axially transformed Ahura Mazda worship in Iran. In the Indian case, though, this rather immediate link is of relatively short duration. The Iranian case, as the Chinese, is of a more long-standing nature, but one where the cosmology involved is of a radically different nature than the one posited in some earlier formulations of the thesis of the Axial Age in terms mainly of a dichotomy between a transcendental and a mundane sphere.

These observations lead to two conclusions. *Firstly* they underline the relevance of the delimitation of the concept of the Axial Age made previously and formulated in a way that focuses on deep-seated redefinitions in key existential dimension, without elevating the outcome in any given civilizational context to the status of being the sole standard of the achievement of axiality.

Secondly, they bring out the need to spell out links between shifts in these dimensions—manifested in new forms of basic conceptualizations and cosmologies—and institutional transformations in terms not of one single form of axial transformation but in terms of a set of different paths of axiality. This is the task to which we now turn.

Overcoming Teleology

Jaspers rejected teleological reasoning. His formulation of the thesis of the Axial Age also marked an effort to overcome the idea of European cultural pre-eminence. It is clear however that much of

the discussion around the Axial Age has been haunted by an implicit teleology, not completely unlike the one that has characterized much of the discussion of modernity and modernization. Even if the Eurocentrism of earlier historiography—and historiosophy[18]—has been absent from virtually all formulations of the idea of the Axial Age, many of them have been unable to avoid an implicit teleology. This has been so in two respects.

Firstly, some formulations have focused on just one specific form of ontological transformation in the basic dimensions of human existence that I have chosen to delineate in terms of increasing reflexivity and sense of the temporal location of human beings and their agential possibility. This particular form of transformation then tends to be depicted as more genuinely axial than another one and indicative of the achievement of a true axial "breakthrough". One typical example of such a conceptualization is one that claims that a defining characteristic of axiality is the positing of a cosmological chasm between a transcendental and a mundane sphere.

This is a view that I do not share. My own view is that the defining characteristic is an increasing reflexivity of human beings and their ability to overcome the bounds of a perceived inevitability of given conditions in temporal and social orderings. The particular cosmology this gives rise to, one cast in terms of transcendence or immanence, is a matter of context and contingency. Therefore I propose an analysis that distinguishes different varieties of axial transformations. I will elaborate upon five different paths of axiality. This is the theme of the next section.

Secondly, there is another, and perhaps more surreptitious, form of teleology involved in discussions about the Axial Age. Even if the existence of separate paths of axiality is recognized, an inherent question still pertains to the modes of viewing societies and cultures that seem to fall outside of the domain of axial transformations. In this perspective, societies and cultures that have passed through the gate of axiality have, as it were, entered the realm of responsible and autonomous action, of a new and higher stage of human existence. But what about the rest? This question will be addressed in the final section of the contribution.

[18] For interesting discussions of these aspects see Assmann, A. (1992) and Koselleck (1986). I have spelt out my own view in Wittrock (2003).

Five Paths of Axiality

It is, as already argued, possible to delineate a meaningful conceptualization of the Axial Age as an epoch in global history that involved profound shifts in at least three fundamental and inescapable dimensions of human existence, namely reflexivity, historicity and agentiality. The Axial Age is not the only period where deep-seated shifts of this type occur. It is, in other words, not the only period of cultural crystallization in global history. In terms of a redefinition along basic dimensions of human existence, the formation of our own modernity is, or so I have argued in several texts,[19] another period of equally profound change. This is, incidentally, a primary justification for engagement with the idea of the Axial Age today. The Axial Age is, however, probably the most consequential cultural crystallization before the Christian Era.

The redefinitions, characterizing a period of cultural crystallization, will always occur in a given historical context and the practical and institutional implications of the shifts mean that a range, but certainly not an unlimited range, of new horizons of human practice are made accessible. Thus while there is no one-to-one relation between a given shift in culture and cosmology and a particular institutional path of development, it is still possible to argue that in a given context some institutional paths are made conceivable, in a literal sense of the word, others not.

There are five distinctly different paths of axial transformations linking cultural and cosmological shifts to institutional transformations, none of which should be given either empirical or normative preferred status. The contributions to this volume provide rich empirical evidence about these different paths. In the present context, I shall only provide a cursory outline their differences. The paths are:

Firstly, there is the development in the Near East whereby, in a complex process of influence and juxtaposition, the Mosaic distinction (to use Jan Assmann's terminology) between true and false in religion and, as a consequence, a distinction between religion and politics, is being drawn not, despite several preparatory steps, in Ancient Egypt but in Ancient Israel. Eventually this distinction, in

[19] See e.g. Wittrock (1998, 1999, 2000, 2001, 2003).

the Prophetic Age and in Second Temple Judaism gives rise to a path of development that may be termed *transcendental-interpretative*.

One significant element is a process of textual inscription and standardization but also of interpretative contestation and the interplay between carriers of orthodoxy and heterodoxy. The participants in these contestations exhibit a remarkable independence relative to political power. Sometimes this reflects a withdrawal from it. However, more often their activities impinge upon the world of rulership, sometimes explicitly, sometimes inadvertently, sometimes as heterodox dissent or even rebellion, sometimes as support for established power

Secondly, there is a related path, fundamentally influenced by Near Eastern developments, but in key respects distinctly different. It is a tradition that gradually emerges in the Greek world and that may be termed a *philosophical-political path of development*. It involves contestation and deliberation that exhibit intense concern about human potentials and action, about the location of human beings in history and constant reflection on the human condition.

However, in this case, a clear distinction between a transcendental and a mundane sphere, something absolutely central to the *transcendental-interpretative* tradition, is relatively insignificant. Nor can one speak of a standardized religious cosmology inscribed in codified texts. Instead contestation is dialogical, if often textually transmitted, and has a philosophical and largely pragmatic character with the political and moral life of a given community, a polis, as an inevitable reference point. The key protagonists in these contestations act in a context that is characterized by a previously unknown combination of intellectual independence, institutional autonomy and political engagement.

Thirdly, there is the particular Chinese path that involves, at least from a period a millennium earlier than the Axial Age proper, the gradual merging and synthesis of different regional ritualistic practices and political orders in a broad synthetic cultural tradition that may be termed *universal-inclusive*. Key features of not only the cultural but also political order are clearly articulated hundreds of years before the Axial Age. In some respects Confucius, Mo and later Mencius and the legalists write against the background of a perceived loss of cohesion, and indeed the demise, of this earlier order and seek its renewed articulation. Cultural and scientific developments can and have (as by Harbsmeier in this volume) been described as

a wide set of incremental shifts but do nonetheless exhibit important ruptures and advances in the period of the Axial Age as does political and social thought with a renewed emphasis on both tradition, history and human agency.

A fundamental feature of this path of axiality is that it is *universal-inclusive* but at the same time characterized by a high degree of contingency even in the political sphere. Thus already in pre-axial Zhou political thought the Mandate of Heaven transfers the ultimate legitimacy to political order. However, it is a revocable mandate and improper conduct is incompatible with the maintenance of this mandate. Therefore heavenly sanctioned imperial rule is nonetheless contingent and open to doubt, critique and potentially revolt. Similarly, there is a synthetic cultural order composed of highly different original tradition some of which may perhaps best be understood as forms of moral philosophy and in the case of two major traditions, Confucianism and Daoism, with little if any concern for any distinction between a transcendental and mundane sphere. Precisely for this reason the *universal-inclusive* path of the Sinic world allows for and involves constant philosophical contestation between different traditions. In a sense a Mosaic distinction need not be drawn in a context, where the relationship between political and religious order has always been of a much more open-ended nature than in the early Near East polities of Egypt and Mesopotamia.

Fourthly, in India early Buddhism constitutes an axial challenge to Vedic religion. This challenge, as discussed by Sheldon Pollock in his contribution to this volume, involves—through a process of semantic appropriation, transvaluation and contestation, a focus on those aspects of that have here been delimited as central to the Axial Age, namely a focus on history and agentiality, and thereby, brings out the potentials of a critical stance towards what are no longer semi-naturalistic practices but rather conventions that may be transgressed.

It is precisely in reaction against this challenge that an articulation of Vedic religion occurs. Thus the Indic world of Vedic religion may have been distinctly non-axial. However, even Vedic religion could not avoid an engagement with the cultural systems that grew out of the early axial transformations. Whereas, both the philosophical-political axiality of Greece and the universal-inclusive one of the Sinic world had political order as its explicit or implicit centre of attention, the political implications of the Indic path—let

us call it *pluralistic-semantic*—largely, and with the possible exception of the Maurya Empire under Ashoka, remained potentials or were entirely contingent.

Fifthly, the geographical and political space where all of the major traditions of Eurasia actually interacted is that of the area of the Achaemenid Empire and its Hellenistic and Iranian successors. In many ways, cultural traditions in the Iranian lands came to serve as direct or indirect sources of inspiration for several of the world religions and imperial orders. On the other hand, knowledge of key aspects of religious, and even political, practices not only in the Achaemenid Empire but even of the Sassanian Empire is lacking. Nevertheless the path of development of the Iranian lands may perhaps be termed one of a *dualistic-agential tradition*, where the relationship between political and religious order is seen as one of mutual dependence and close interaction, where there is a distinction between a transcendental and a mundane sphere but where the battles within these spheres have direct implications for all actions also in the mundane sphere.

It is therefore a tradition with an articulated cosmology yet in its dualistic conceptualization of this cosmology it differs fundamentally from the cosmology of mainstream Judaism, Christendom and Islam. This however, also means that the cosmological distinction between a transcendental and a mundane sphere is consistent with a strong this-worldly orientation of practical engagement and action also in the realm of political order. The relationship of the main intellectual-religious carriers of this cosmology to political power is characterized by proximity and reciprocal dependence. As in other forms of axiality, here there are also forms of heterodoxy and dissent. However, on the whole, there is a more explicit and direct link to imperial power than found along the other paths of axiality.

The Achaemenid Empire came to exert a far-reaching influence on later types of imperial orders in the region of the Mediterranean and the Near East. In the first millennium CE the Sassanian Empire was in its own self-conception the legitimate heir of the Achaemenid Empire. The Byzantine Eastern Roman Empire—for half a millennium the main competitor of the Sassanian Empire in the Eastern Mediterranean and Near Eastern region—with its Hellenistic and urban legacy was structurally different from the Sassanian Empire. However from the seventh century onwards it increasingly, not least as a result of the loss of rich urban centres in Syria and Egypt in

the wake of the original Islamic onslaught, came to exhibit many features reminiscent of the Iranian imperial model. This was so in terms of changes in military-territorial organization in a direction that in medieval Western Europe came to be called feudal. It was also the case in terms of a gradual change in relationships between political and religious order. The Achaemenid Empire was the first imperial political order to be premised on a cosmology that was axial and at the same time involved a close reciprocal, but not symmetric, relationship between the leading representatives of political and of cosmological-religious order. The same is true for the Sassanian Empire but also for the successor of that Empire, namely the new Islamic political order, at least as it emerged with the establishment of the Abbasid Caliphate.

As was the case with the Roman Empire, the Achaemenid Empire was characterized by a tolerance of minority cultures and languages. Unlike the Roman Empire, it did not engage in efforts to promote the language of the rulers, i.e. Old Persian, relative to the language of other peoples of the Empire. However, the Iranian Empires, as well as the classical Roman Empire, involved elements of, to use Sheldon Pollock's expression (in this volume), ethno-transcendence, i.e. the assignment of a crucial place in the imperial project to an ethnically defined people that is linked both to the temporal extension of empire and to its divine protection.

Both Roman and Iranian imperial patterns are distinctly different from those of India but also from the cultural-political order of Ancient Israel and Ancient Greece during the early axial transformations—and of course also from that on non-Roman and non-axial Europe. In both Ancient Greece and Ancient Israel the position of the intellectual carriers of interpretative elaborations was characterized by greater independence relative to the holders of political power. This is again one reason why it would be erroneous to assume a necessary relationship between axiality and imperial order. One may indeed argue, that the post-axial imperial orders, while often embracing a cosmology of axial origins, often involved severe institutional constraints and a reduction in intellectual autonomy for the carriers of axial thought.

Perhaps we may summarize, with all inevitable simplifications, some of the points above in a figure.

Figure. Five Paths of Axiality

Region of Emergence	*Cultural-Cosmological Focus*	*Relation to Political Power*	*Ethno-linguistic Force*
Ancient Israel	transcendental-interpretative	strong independence	autonomous
Greece	philosophical-political	strong independence	weakly ecumenical
China	universal-inclusive	weak dependence	strongly ecumenical
India	pluralistic-semantic	strong independence	weakly ecumenical
Iran	dualistic-agential	strong dependence	ethno-transcendence cum linguistic pluralism

If anything, this figure highlights three conclusions indicated above. *Firstly*, a qualitative increase in reflexivity, historicality and agentiality is characteristic of the Axial Age and is the very premise for any reasoned distinction between political order and religious-cultural order and hence for the opening of the possibility of a challenge to cultural claims of legitimacy of political order. Once this possibility has been conceptually permitted, it is a potential that can never henceforth be "unthought", i.e. the potential of a fundamental challenge of established order can never again be permanently removed. However, the cultural-cosmological construct that allows for such a distinction may, but does not need to, rest on a crucial distinction between a transcendental and a mundane sphere. In fact in four of the five paths of axiality, this is not the case.

Secondly, the institutional position of the interpreters of a given cultural-religious cosmology determines whether the potentials of the increases in reflexivity are being realized or not. Within all the five paths of axiality there was always interplay between orthodoxy and heterodoxy, and there were always contending articulations of a given cultural-cosmological order. Often, as in the cases of both India and China, there was also always contention between deeply different cosmologies. Even in the case of Sassanian Iran, Zoroastrian orthodoxy had always to contend with heterodox interpretations (Zurvanism, Mazdakism).

Thirdly, there are fundamental differences in terms of the ethno-linguistic force of the different paths of axiality. From the perspective of our own age, it is difficult not to reflect upon the fact that

virtually all modern imperial orders reflect a form of the Roman-Eastern Mediterranean path rather than the less impositional ones of some of the other axial paths or the more ecumenical path of one of them, i.e. China. From the point of view of modern social thought and with the newly awakened interest in imperial orders, it seems that the study of the Axial Age, if nothing else, might serve an urgent need to broaden the range of imagination of modern social and political thought.

The Axial Age in Global History: Transformations Axial and Non-Axial

The Axial Age involved a series of momentous transformations that affected a number of cultures across Eurasia from a global historical perspective and over a relatively limited range of time. These transformations came to have far-reaching implications. However the rest of global history cannot possibly be regarded just as the unfolding of the consequences of an original breakthrough. Nevertheless, the axial transformations involved deep-seated shifts along the key existential dimensions of reflectivity, historicity and agentiality and constitute one, but not the only, period of cultural crystallization in global history.

All such crystallization are manifested in a variety of institutional transformations that will determine important parameters for cultural and political developments for periods to come. However, this does not commit us to either a belief in the end of history, nor to a hypothesis that the particular reconfiguration of positions on these dimensions would have to be the same or even similar in different cultures or civilizations. Such momentous reconfigurations, in particular the *Axial Age*, the transformations of the eleventh to thirteenth centuries—what in another context I have termed the period of *Ecumenical Renaissance*—and the *formation of modernity*, should also be examined in comparative terms.

Here neither a purely structural account, nor one that just highlights the contingency of language, is of much help. It is also here that both the conceptual historical analysis of Reinhart Koselleck and the historical phenomenological one of Karl Jaspers, and in a related way also of S.N. Eisenstadt, raise important questions beyond those that most historical sociologists and speech-act theorists find interesting or indeed legitimate. Thus beyond speech acts proper and beyond both linguistic conventions and the social structural

conditions, there are a few unavoidable dilemmas posed by our very existence as reflecting human beings. One inevitable fact is the finite nature of our physical existence but equally inevitable is the need to adopt some kind of position relative to a few basic phenomenological dimensions. These dimensions, inherent in our existence as human beings, pertain to the finitude of our own existence, to universal anthropological necessities of drawing boundaries between the inside and outside of a community and of recognizing the temporal and social location of our own existence relative to that of others.[20]

An articulation of the phenomenology of reflexive human existence is inherent in the human condition. Our very capacity to reflect upon our own situation entails the inevitability of a boundary between the world and ourselves; the world is no longer a seamless web from which we cannot even reflectively distance ourselves. This, of course, is what Jaspers saw as the origin of history in the sense not of biological reproduction but of the self-reflexivity of humankind. Reflexivity entails the unavoidability of some boundary between inside and outside, no matter where this boundary is drawn and how it is constructed. Our realization of the finitude of our own existence entails a reflection on our temporal and historical location. These types of reflexivity and our realization of the existence of orderings in relations between oneself and other human beings entail the potential of concepts of changing states of the world, of what social scientists today would call agentiality.

Here two statements of caution are necessary. *Firstly*, the recognition of these phenomenological dimensions does not entail any single specific theory of historical meaning. It is compatible with an analysis—as that undertaken in the history of political thought by the Cambridge contextualists—that emphasizes the role of conventions and rejects that of hermeneutic interpretation, as well as with a hermeneutic or historical intentionalist analysis. Secondly, the particular positions adopted along these phenomenological dimensions may of course, as highlighted by the contributions to this volume, vary dramatically across historical epochs and civilizations.[21]

Maybe a critic might say that these dimensions are so general as to be of little real interest or importance. Such a comment would, however, be mistaken. On the contrary, a historical phenomenol-

[20] See Koselleck (1987b) and (1989).
[21] See also Eisenstadt (1987) and (1992).

ogy of this type has two invaluable characteristics. Firstly, it provides an analytical focus to the study of individual speech acts and contestations. I have suggested the term cultural crystallization to denote periods of fundamental reconceptualizations of positions on these phenomenological dimensions, leading to basic reconfigurations or reassertions of macro-institutional practices. *Secondly* then such an analysis, in what might be called the Jaspers-Koselleck-Eisenstadt tradition of historical phenomenology, makes the reintroduction of civilizational analysis into empirical historical research possible.

The existence of varieties of axial transformations must, as already argued, be recognized. However, is there not a lingering, if implicit, teleology in such an analysis when it comes to societies and cultures that were not part of the transformations of the Axial Age? To some extent this is, and inescapably so, the case, if the notion of an Axial Age is to carry any meaning. However, one of the reasons we may call the Axial Age an epoch in global history is that its eventual implications were indeed global. The axial transformations faced non-axial cultures and societies with a choice between accommodation and rejection. Accommodation sometimes took the form of wholesale conversion to the cosmology of a religion or a political order steeped in an axial cosmology. In other cases, it involved the addition of an axial cosmology to a set of distinctly non-axial cosmologies and practices. This was essentially the way that the Chinese cultural ecumene came to deal with Mahayana Buddhism in the centuries around the middle of the first millennium CE, namely as a set of beliefs and precepts parallel to those of Confucianism, itself certainly part of the Axial Age, and Daoism, which was not, and, in the Western provinces bordering Central Asia, to some extent also, Nestorian Christianity and Zoroastrianism.

Christianity as a distinctly axial synthesis of Jewish and Hellenistic beliefs and practices came, eventually to exemplify the first pattern of development within the ecumene of Latin Christendom; it was only in the Northern- and Easternmost peripheries of Europe, where the conversion to Christianity came even later than the arrival of Buddhism to Japan, that strong non-axial elements survived long after formal Christianization.

In South Asia, the emergence of Buddhism marks a moment of axiality and a demarcation against Vedic religion. However, it is precisely in reaction against this challenge that an articulation of Vedic religion occurs. Much later, beginning with the eighth to tenth

centuries CE, what may then be termed Hinduism goes through another stage of a articulation, this time in conscious demarcation against Islam as a religion and cultural system that could not as easily as Buddhism and largely also early Christianity be assimilated into the Indic world. Thus the Indic world of Vedic religion may have been distinctly non-axial. However, even Vedic religion could not avoid an engagement with the cultural systems that grew out of the early axial transformations. Thus axial transformations came to impinge upon and influence cultures and societies across Eurasia, with or without the rejection, or acceptance, of some of the specific paths of axiality discussed in the previous section.

Fundamental redefinitions along the dimensions of reflexive consciousness, of historicity and agentiality—to use once again the language of social theory—are what characterize periods of deep-seated cultural crystallization, be they the Axial Age in the analysis of Alfred and Max Weber, Karl Jaspers and S.N. Eisenstadt or be they the formative moment of a new era in late eighteenth century Europe in the analysis of Reinhart Koselleck, the conceptual historians and the new historical sociologists. These dimensions are no mere cumbersome ontological addition to conceptual history. It is existentially unavoidable for us as reflecting human beings to relate to them. Nonetheless, it is precisely for this reason that they are also analytically necessary presuppositions for a historical phenomenology that is able to engage with conceptual change in global history.

Ultimately, the cultural crystallizations that constitute formative moments in global history involve an institutional articulation and interpretation of the human condition, of what it means to conceptualize the finitude of our own existence in a world premised on assumptions of the potentially infinite malleability of the world upon which and into which our actions impinge and what human existence may mean in such a world.

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PALOMAR'S QUESTIONS. THE AXIAL AGE HYPOTHESIS, EUROPEAN MODERNITY AND HISTORICAL CONTINGENCY

PETER WAGNER

Non si sa cosa significano.

Italo Calvino, *Palomar*

> World history may look like a chaos of chance events—in its entirety like the swirling waters of a whirlpool. It goes on and on, from one muddle to another, from one disaster to another, with brief flashes of happiness, with islands that remain for a short time protected from the flood, till they too are submerged; all in all, in a metaphor of Max Weber: World history resembles a street paved by the devil with destroyed values.
>
> Karl Jaspers, *The Origin and Goal of History*

Italo Calvino's *Palomar*—a significant, and neglected, contribution to the philosophy and methodology of the social sciences—contains a very telling confrontation of two different approaches to archaeology.[1] Led onto a site in Mexico, Palomar is exposed both to an erudite scholar of prehispanic civilizations and to an apparently native guide of a class of similarly native schoolchildren. While the former eloquently weaves a thick narrative of meanings connecting all the visible remains of the ancient civilization to each other, the latter describes what can be seen and characterizes the objects in terms of their material and the approximate date of creation before he invariably concludes: "One does not know what they mean." At one point, when the guide describes a mural sculpture on which a pro-

[1] Calvino (2002 [1983]), 97-100, all translations from these pages are my own upon consultation of Weaver in Calvino (1994 [1983]).

cession of snakes, each with a human skull in their mouth, is depicted, the scholar in Palomar's company exasperatedly objects: "Yes, we do [know]! It's the continuity of life and death; the serpents are life, the skulls are death. Life is life because it bears death with it, and death is death because there is no life without death ..." Acting as our guide to the search for socio-historical knowledge, Palomar then asks himself what death, life, continuity and passage may have meant to the ancient creators of the sculpture, and what they mean to the schoolchildren listening to their guide, and to himself. "And yet [Palomar] knows he could never suppress in himself the need to translate, to pass from one language to another, from concrete figures to abstract words, from abstract symbols to concrete experience, to weave and re-weave a network of analogies. Not to interpret is impossible, just as it is impossible to refrain from thought."

Reading through the comprehensive re-assessment of the Axial Age hypothesis offered in this volume, one can very easily find oneself in Palomar's situation, exposed to a variety of different interpretations, which are characterized not least by the variable degree of certainty with which they sustain or reject the Axial Age hypothesis. No further comments on the detail of the analyses will, therefore, be offered in this contribution. Rather, I want to ask other questions that, it seems to me, have always been at the core of the hypothesis itself. In general, these are questions about the extent of our historical knowledge, and the meanings of historical investigation, i.e. about the relation that interpreters of history forge with the "past".[2] More specifically, however, these are questions about the ways in which profound socio-historical transformations occur, and

[2] Historiography is always a relation towards a past created by actors in the present. Historical interpretations certainly do not change because 'the past' changes, since it does not. However, even the two standard views of current historiography combined are insufficient to describe the reasons for what appears as a 'changing past': Neither can 'new evidence' sufficiently explain changes in historical interpretations, as a 'neo-positivist' understanding would hold, nor can one be satisfied with the insight into the persistent possibility of a plurality of perspectives on the past, as a Nietzsche-inspired view would have it, today often denounced as 'postmodern'. 'The past' also gets transformed when the 'distance'—in a not necessarily numerically measurable sense—between the past and the respective present from which it is investigated changes. For related reflections applied to phenomena much closer to our time, see the issue of *Thesis Eleven* (2002) devoted to analyses of '1968' and its consequences.

whether some such transformations contain some of the key elements that give form and direction to history.[3]

On the Origins and Goal of the Axial Age Debate

In the light of these questions, two rather simple observations about the Axial Age debate gain significance.[4] First, the Axial Age debate can be described as moving between two quite different genres of investigation, or as trying to connect those two genres, namely historical sociology and philosophy of history. The former aims at understanding historical processes by comparing them with one another by means of sociological categories. The latter tries to understand the relation of ourselves in the present to the past by means of conjecturing about the meaning and direction of history. Within the Axial Age debate, even though neat distinctions are impossible, as I will argue in a moment, the Weber brothers at its beginnings and Eisenstadt in the current phase stand close to the socio-historical pole, whereas Jaspers and Voegelin in-between are close to the philosophical one. In our time, one may easily be tempted—and to some extent this is indeed the thrust of this volume—to permanently abandon the latter approach and to concentrate on minute socio-historical reconstruction and conceptual clarification to finally determine clearly which aspect of the Axial Age hypothesis can be sustained and which can not. True, the contributions with a strong philosophical emphasis can easily be criticized, and often discarded, because of unsustainability in the light of historical evidence and/

[3] It is easy to object to the very posing of both kinds of questions. The first, general set refers to what we may call the methodology of historiography. While some such reflection may be needed, mostly when training future academic historians, too much of it could quickly lead into an impasse. The second, more specific set—even much more problematically—refers to issues only a philosophy of history can deal with, a discipline, though, that has been rightly abandoned, many will argue, precisely because these questions cannot be answered and, thus, should not be posed. I will here, however, side with Palomar and maintain: 'Not to interpret is impossible.' Beyond Palomar, I want to suggest that a comparison of the actual answers that have been given to these questions may at least lead further in understanding the range of plausible answers that can be given.

[4] Support for both of these observations emerges strongly from Johann Arnason's nuanced reconstruction, in this volume, to which I refer for detail of the debate. In general, thanks are due to Johann Arnason as well as to Sheldon Pollock and Nathalie Karagiannis for comments on an earlier version of this article.

or untenability of some of their normative assumptions. Once one moves determinedly to the socio-historical mode of investigation, however, the entire hypothesis will dissolve in a welter of divergent observations. One starts to wonder whether there was any question at all. The transformations certain Eurasian social configurations underwent between the eighth and the second century BCE were of a great variety of origins, forms and outcomes. And these transformations can only be held together by a question that we have to pose and that relates us to those transformations—this question, thus, will inevitably be posed in cultural-philosophical terms, as Max Weber, not a purist socio-historical mind at all, was always ready to grant.[5] At this point, a look at the context of the debate is not only legitimate, but necessary—this leads to my second observation about the debate.

The Axial Age hypothesis is a product of the short European twentieth century. Even though a similar general idea was connected with the construction of world-history as consisting of a variety of "high civilizations" in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, it gains more temporal precision with observations by Max Weber during the First World War, as Johann Arnason writes.[6] It arrives in its most forceful expression after the end of Nazism and the Second World War—and is clearly related to both—with the works by Jaspers and Voegelin; and it regains momentum with Shmuel Eisenstadt's comparative research programme after the strong critique of Western modernity in the late 1970s and during the declining period of Soviet socialism.

Even though this short century is rich in historical turns, it becomes immediately evident that the debate about the Axial Age is work at self-understanding within a civilization, work at self-positioning at certain historical moments by reconstructing the long-term trajectory that led to these moments. The emphasis on the achievement of a reflexive relation to one's own history during the Axial Age is thus mirrored in that very debate being an exercise in his-

[5] In other words, the link between the two genres can be provided if the historical sociology employed demonstrates a strong cultural and hermeneutic sensitivity and if the philosophy of history pays attention to historiographical insight. Under these circumstances, the Axial Age hypothesis was and remains an important heuristic device for both understanding the past and situating ourselves in the present.

[6] In his contribution to this volume.

torical reflexivity. With all due caution against the ever-present risk of oversimplification, one may even trace the stages of the debate as an exercise in reflexivity that changes with the abrupt turns of history in the twentieth century.

Max Weber's interrogation of the specificity of the West still harbours a sense of radical Western exceptionalism, understood by contrasting the West with other world regions, even though Weber's work marks a strong break with the historiography of evolutionary progress that had dominated much of the nineteenth century. With Jaspers and Voegelin, after the disasters of mid-century, a more self-critical look emerged. One way of gaining distance from the Roman-Christian core of the mostly self-congratulatory self-understanding that had—implicitly or explicitly –long dominated was the recourse to the "extra-European" sources of that self-understanding, namely Judaism and Greek philosophy.[7] This—at first sight, apparently minor—shift in emphasis entailed a significant conceptual step away from even Weber's sociology of world-religions. By focusing on world-views that had informed the rise and formation of Europe, but were only in an ambivalent way a central part of Europe, it allowed the move beyond the opposition between a rationalizing Occident and other civilizations that lacked this potential. Thus, it permitted a more open-minded view of the plurality of world-views and a more profoundly self-critical view of Europe and of the West. The birth of the fully developed Axial Age hypothesis, thus, needs to be seen as a discourse of crisis and as a contribution to reorientation.

To understand the subsequent round of debate, one needs to remember that the Axial Age hypothesis was not widely debated during the "trente glorieuses" after the West's recovery from the doubt-ridden immediate aftermath of the Second World War, neither in Jaspers' nor in Voegelin's version. Despite the Cold War, optimism about evolutionary progress and the superior mode of societal rationalization in the West regained intellectual predominance, with sociological modernization theory now becoming a full substitute to earlier modes of philosophy of history. Eisenstadt's

[7] 'Extra-European' not necessarily in a territorial, but in a temporal sense, referring to intellectual developments before the birth of Europe; see Patočka (1996), e.g. 83, 109, for a historico-philosophical account of the rise of Europe and, more recently, Brague (1992) for a masterful portrait of Europe's 'secondarity', i.e. its reliance on sources for its identity that stem from outside itself—more on this below.

reappraisal of the Axial Age hypothesis is then fully informed by the enormously developed work in comparative-historical sociology during the 1960s and 1970s. On this basis, it breaks with the linear evolutionism of modernization theory and any idea of convergence and uses the recourse to the Axial Age debates as a corner-stone for a theorization of multiple modernities, as the contemporary expression, namely, of the variety of cultural programmes into which modernity can be, and historically has been, inscribed. While Eisenstadt's work can thus be described as an intellectual innovation inside a sociological research programme, the comparative study of modern society, its significance would not be fully grasped without a look at its socio-political context. Short of a full analysis along these lines, for which there is no space here, the most important contextual occurrences to note are the rise of non-Western societies, first of all Japan, to full economic competitiveness; the process of decolonization that is accompanied by expressions of cultural-symbolic assertiveness against the Western model; the Iranian revolution with its explicit break with a programme of Westernization; and the rising internal criticism of Western modernity, much of which has been captured under the name of postmodernism. In this sense, the reappraisal of the Axial Age question as the underpinning for the conceptualization of the diversity of forms of modernity is again a contribution to a critical reorientation of the, broadly understood, "Western" self-understanding at a moment of crisis and, possibly, of a historical turning-point.[8]

The Central Questions of the Axial Age Debate

This brief attempt at reconstructing a contextual history of the Axial Age debate served one main objective: To demonstrate how the tension between the historical sociology and the philosophy of history of the Axial Age can be understood and, in the end, appreciated as an inevitable, and not necessarily unacceptable, combined employment of different genres of inquiry for a given purpose. The results of further investigations into the Axial Age, thus, have to

[8] The 'self' that is in crisis and aims at reorientation is not the same across the century of debate about the Axial Age and varies also with the contributors to the debate. Below I will return to a brief discussion about Europe in this context.

withstand a double test: They have to be sustainable in the light of the best available historical evidence, and they have to give answers to the questions we pose to the past from the point of view of the present. Rather than making the debate more complicated, though, this double requirement may make the assessment of the findings easier. Some of the issues that are contested or remain unanswerable from the point of view of historical sociology, namely, do not necessarily need an answer from the point of view of philosophy of history.

This maxim requires of us first of all a clarification of the question to which end we keep investigating the Axial Age. Abstracting across the various layers of the Axial Age debate, two questions appear to possess central and persistent significance: We are interested in the conditions under which, and the ways in which, human beings relate reflexively to their being in the world. And we aim to assess the possibility of human beings to collectively employ their capacity for reflexivity such that they can critically relate to their history and give themselves new orientations in the present.[9] A third question possibly can be added: We would like to know how far our contemporary location as members of certain societies or civilizations rather than others provides us with specific cultural resources and constraints from the past. But I will address this third question only later in this essay.

The continuous deepening of scholarship on the Axial Age as well as its widening in terms of an extension of the Axial Age problématique to regions and periods outside of the original core area of interest, as impressively documented in this volume, has in my view led to two rather clear-cut results. First, in the absence of the above questions, it becomes difficult to identify an Axial Age at all. The refinement of knowledge has led to a gradual disappearance of the

[9] This way of formulating the issue relates closely to the first three items in Björn Wittrock's summary (in this volume) of the key contentions of the Axial Age hypothesis: reflexivity, historicity, agentiality. For reasons that will become clearer in the course of my argument, I tend to define these three concepts as follows: Reflexivity refers here to the human ability to, by means of imagination, step out of the immediate present and to imagine other possible worlds, or partial worlds. Historicity refers to the translation of such imagination into time, by means of which the present can be distinguished from a past that was different and from a future that may be different. Agentiality refers to the belief that human action may contribute to bring a particular different future about.

view that there is a relatively limited period in time during which a number of neighbouring Eurasian civilizations underwent major transformations that were highly specific in world-history and, at the same time, so similar in kind that they can be grasped with a very limited number of key concepts. Second, however, when we connect the above questions to the historical findings, we receive a rather strong and—normatively speaking (a question that I cannot address in full in this essay)—highly encouraging answer. There are more instances than initially expected of plausible evidence of reflexive engagement of human beings with their situation, and there are also more cases in which such engagements aspired towards, and sometimes achieved, a re-direction of collective self-understandings. If one permits a loose way of speaking for a moment, one may say that the Axial Age keeps expanding with the growth of knowledge about the past.

If I am correct, it is not merely better evidence that is responsible for this enlargement of the Axial Age. There seem to be at least two other reasons. First, compared to Jaspers' time, and also later, scepticism in the human and social sciences has grown about the tenability of any firm demarcation line between our time, however defined, and the times preceding it. The critical scrutiny of the use of asymmetric counter-concepts, such as both "history" and "prehistory" and "modernity" and "tradition", as pioneered in the historiography of concepts, has had an impact across all fields of scholarship and has redirected the empirical gaze.[10] Second, the understanding of the key concepts in use in the Axial Age debate—reflexivity, historicity, agentiality—has been significantly broadened beyond the interpretations they have received in European intellectual history of the past two centuries, not least due to work in anthropology and postcolonial studies.[11]

The issue gets considerably more complicated when we look at the collective outcomes of the reflexive engagement of human beings with their world. The very least we can say, though, is that the results give evidence of the diversity of "mises en forme du monde"—using Johann Arnason's reference to Maurice Merleau-Ponty—that

[10] Koselleck (1979)

[11] See Fabian (1983) and Chakrabarty (2000) as two key examples—even though Sheldon Pollock's call for further caution, in this volume, may still be needed.

has been created and sustained by human beings. Research on the Axial Age has thus provided empirical underpinnings for theses, such as the one offered by Cornelius Castoriadis, about the existence of a wide range of "imaginary significations of society" in human history. Castoriadis indeed connects that observation to the view that these imaginary significations cannot but be seen as human creations, thus giving evidence for the human capacity for radical imagination.[12] And maybe this is all we need to know, at least in the first instance. However, one immediately gets the sense that a shift of interest from human capacities to the outcomes of the use of these capacities makes the Axial Age, and the interest in it, more contested. To advance the reasoning further, it may be useful to first identify the questions we do not need to answer.

Questions we Need neither Ask nor Answer

For several, probably most, contributors to the Axial Age debate, it was important to argue that the age brought radical novelty into human history, for some it meant even the beginning of human history in the stricter sense of the term. It is quite clear, though, that this reasoning cannot be sustained in general terms. On the one hand, the "expansion" of the Axial Age through further research, as discussed above, also took place "backwards" into earlier history, as is most convincingly argued by Jan Assmann in this volume, who detects axial features in "pre-axial" Egypt. On the other hand, as the same author cautions in other places, we just do not know enough about earlier social configurations to make a strong statement about the radical rupture that axial transformations allegedly marked.[13] The Axial Age has long marked the limit of our at least relatively certain knowledge about the ancient world, because of the availability of written and readable sources, and it has been given priority of interpretation for that very reason, not because it necessarily stood out from history.

But then again, the Axial Age need not mark history's beginning, or even stand out from history, to offer satisfactory answers to the questions we pose. Research and speculation on the Axial Age pro-

[12] Castoriadis (1990) and elsewhere.
[13] Assmann, J. (1992), 245.

vided early answers to these questions. But there is no good reason why acceptable answers should not emerge from elsewhere in human history. Viewed in detail, though, the strong claim for specificity of the period rests on yet another hypothesis that we need to briefly discuss. It is argued that the axial transformations created civilizational forms that could be durably *institutionalized* and proved, thus, more sustainable than other assertions of reflexivity in human history.[14] This claim, if I understand it correctly, is based on assumptions about crucial occurrences during the period, namely the elaboration of cosmologies based on a separation of a transcendental from a mundane sphere and the codification of these cosmologies in textual form and their diffusion by intellectual elites. I want to first argue that these assumptions again lead to discussions not necessary to answer our questions, and then discuss the empirical-historical claim that the civilizational forms created during the Axial Age gave lasting shape to world-history.

The main problem with these further assumptions is that they are far too specific. They tend to "shrink" the Axial Age, whereas the tendency of recent research was to "expand" it, as discussed above. And by virtue—or rather: vice—of their overspecificity, they reduce the understanding of more general phenomena and limit comparative investigations in stead of enhancing them. While it is overall plausible to assume that the preservation in writing of basic texts that ground the key commitments of a group of human beings alters *something* compared to the transmission via oral speech, what it precisely alters is much more difficult to say. On the one hand, it can be argued that the availability in writing of central texts supports both a broader diffusion of a given cosmology through a social configuration and a greater consistency and homogeneity of the "message" that is conveyed. On the other hand, however, one may insist on the infinity of interpretations that is possible with any text, and the availability of a central text may precisely have instigated the pluralization of interpretations. With this basic question being undecided, the close association of axiality with the written risks to

[14] This is the main gist of the second series of volumes on the Axial Age published under the mentorship of Shmuel Eisenstadt, those that deal with the 'institutional and cultural dynamics' of Axial Age cultures and, more often than not, suggest that Axial Age cultures were sustained until they encountered modernity (see Eisenstadt 1992, especially volumes 1 and 3).

give undue weight to the "religions of the book" in the narrative of world-history—a note on "Greek exceptionalism" will be added below.[15]

This suspicion is confirmed by a consideration of the argument about the separation of the transcendental and mundane, since a codification of that separation is certainly key to the understanding of monotheistic religions. A closer, more contextual look at the axial transformations, as it is offered in many contributions to this volume, suggests a different, broader interpretation. Given that these transformations occur in contexts of political crisis, often of deep dissatisfaction with the existing political regime, the recourse to the "transcendental" most broadly refers to the conviction that, to use a slogan of our time, "another world is possible".[16] This conviction may be codified in terms of a distinction between religion and politics, then often assuming that the "other world" is already there, only "elsewhere", or that it will be there with certainty, but is "always yet to come", at the end of times. And the certainty of that other world may then be revealed in a book. But rather than any certainty, its possibility may find expression also quite differently, as Kurt Raaflaub rightly argues for ancient Greece, after all a core case for the Axial Age hypothesis: the possibility and availability of another world may be debated—orally and textually—and contended in political action.

The "classical" model of the Axial Age hypothesis appears to project upon the past. I take this to be roughly the following: the core features of reflexivity, historicity and agentiality are actualized by reference to a central text that provides the basis for the transcendental perspective and is interpreted by a specialized class of readers who under certain conditions can convey their reading in such a way so as to initiate and support a major social transformation. This is rather precisely the model of revolutionary activity by intellectuals based on insight into the essence of the world, as it formed in nineteenth-century Europe in an amalgamation of ideal-

[15] Such overemphasis was evident in Jaspers' work, though much less so in Eisenstadt's where the focus is more on intellectual elites. On the issue of cultural transmission in general, a key text now is Assmann, Jan (1999).

[16] See also Voegelin (1987) on 'imagination': 'Imagination offers imagining man escapes from a sort of reality by which it is governed' (p. 38). Voegelin then goes on to discuss German idealism.

ism, class struggle and the formation of an avantgarde. The question is whether our understanding of world-history would not be helped if we were to abandon the attempt to generalize such a model, and rather took from the observation of the Axial Age the broader insights that the faculty of imagination allows human beings to consider states of the world as possible that differ from the actual one and that the communication about such different possible states may support collective action to bring such states about. In my view, that question deserves an affirmative answer.

Axiality and Civilizational Patterns

However, the resonance between the nineteenth-century European situation and the interpretation of the Axial Age, rather than a matter of perspective, could also have its basis in the fact that the transformations of the axial period brought about the basic structure of the world as we still know it today. This is what is also argued in the Axial Age hypothesis, and maybe it is its most significant claim: during the axial transformation, a plurality of civilizational forms was created and institutionalized. These developed across varied civilizational trajectories to be still recognizable in the plurality of contemporary civilizational forms. (Here I return to the third question, mentioned above but postponed.) With this emphasis, the Axial Age hypothesis lays the ground not only for the claim that there has been, as suggested above, a plurality of possible "mises en forme du monde", but also for reasons to sustain the current existence of multiple forms of modernity, which namely can be traced to the persistence, while undergoing changes and re-interpretations, of those once-instituted forms.

Again, I want to suggest that we can retain the main insight from this conceptualization while shedding some of its more problematic, sometimes outright unsustainable, implications without relinquishing our capacity to answer the questions we ask of world-history. There is little doubt that some of the socio-cultural configurations described by the Axial Age hypothesis indeed underwent a major social transformation during the period in question. What, however, are our means to assert whether these transformations gave rise to "axial civilizations" of a certain durability and world-historical specificity? The *prima facie* case for the assertion is the presence in the contemporary world of Greek philosophy and political thought and

Judaism, going back to the core cases of the Axial Age hypothesis, and of Confucianism, Christianity, Islam as well, and, furthermore, the fact that these modes of thinking exist in some affinity to territorially defined polities in the current world.

However, it seems right to underline, with Aleida and Jan Assmann, first, that this presence is the result of the creation of a tradition that started in the Axial Age but needed to be steadily pursued through "social labour" across the centuries, which indeed were also marked by temporary losses, re-appropriations and re-interpretations. Following up the earlier reasoning about the lack of knowledge about pre-axial times, one needs to insist that the fact that other cosmologies were not preserved and universalized does not entail that they were not preservable and universalizable. All we can say positively is that those texts that are still present have been preserved, and to understand how that was possible we need a "sociology of tradition" that does not yet exist.[17] Secondly, the precise nature of the affinity between a cosmology and a territorially defined polity also needs further exploration. While it is true that the Axial Age debate does not consistently make a strong assumption about a tendency towards correspondence between "culture" and "politics" in the post-axial world, it does suggest that common interpretations of the world have led to the creation of "civilizations" that provide underpinnings for political formations.[18]

Our current thinking about this question is strongly informed by the European experience of building national polities based on the assumption of the need for a cultural-linguistic underpinning of a modern polity, and one may have the suspicion that too much of this contemporary thinking also inspired the interpretation of the Axial Age. In such view, polities are seen as the institutional expression of a collective identity based on shared norms and values. While there may be some—insufficient, anyway—ground for such reasoning if it refers to consolidated democratic polities constituted by some form of expression of opinion and will by its members,[19] it needs

[17] Assmann, J. (1992), 246-247; Assmann, A. (1992), 338, for the term 'sociology of tradition'; the term 'social labour' is borrowed from Luc Boltanski (e.g., 1990); see also Wagner (2003).

[18] For a critical discussion of empire formation in the wake of the Axial Age, see Sheldon Pollock's contribution to this volume.

[19] For discussions about transformations of contemporary polities in related terms, see Wagner (1996) and Friese and Wagner (2002).

heavy qualification for all other political configurations. While there is no space for detailed exploration here, one of the assumptions in the idea of such correspondence needs to be explicitly problematized: Polities often indeed have clear boundaries that are more or less well guarded by military, police and administrative officials. If "cultures", however, are to correspond to polities, then norms, values, cosmologies need to be shared by precisely the same group of people, the members of the polity. Cultures are then seen as distinct units of social life, internally coherent and closed towards other cultures. But there is no reason to assume that values and beliefs should not have other patterns of distribution among human beings, patterns not related to the boundaries of instituted polities.[20] In the version offered by the Axial Age debate, civilizations tend to become cultures writ large, and there is a distinct risk that the analysis of multiple modernities, if based on the Axial Age debate, succumbs to the temptation of repeating the error of European social theory of much of the nineteenth and twentieth century, namely to inscribe the forms of modernity into compact and stable units similar to the national societies of former theorizing. The variety of contemporary modernity, however, can find expression in a range of ways, only some of which may overlap with constituted polities. If one looks at contemporary polities and their members, it seems very clear that it is most often highly difficult—and at the very least a highly complex exercise—to trace the cosmologies to which they may be committed to the axial transformations. For East Asian societies, one can show that the common reference to Confucianism can be more misleading than helpful.[21] In the following, I will briefly discuss Europe's relation to the axial transformation in this light.

Axiality and Europe

The first of the two primary reasons why Europe is of particular interest in this context, is well known. The European historical trajectory is closely connected to what is often called the rise of mo-

[20] For a related discussion in early social science, see Mohl (1851); for a discussion of the concept of culture in contemporary social theory, see Friese and Wagner (1999).

[21] See, e.g., Arnason (2001a) for Japan, and Shin (2002) for Korea.

dernity, and the Axial Age debate has been a significant means of broadening the debate about modernity, of making it less Eurocentric. A discussion about the relation between axiality and Europe is necessarily a discussion about modernity insofar as the latter is understood as a spatio-temporal phenomenon.[22] What makes this discussion difficult and complex, however, is the fact that "Europe" was not present in the Axial Age and that the relation between the Axial Age and the existing forms of Europe at later points in history can be constructed in different ways and, indeed, have been constructed in a number of highly different ways.[23]

The topical significance of the question becomes evident when one looks at current discussions about the sense in which contemporary Europe is "Christian" and the related question whether this feature should be noted in the constitution of the emerging European polity. While, as noted above, there are some good reasons to assume that Europe is born historically in the declining phase of the Catholic-Christian Western Roman Empire, it is important to note at the same time that this "identity" of Europe is "eccentric", because it relies on at least two major sources of inspiration outside of Europe, Judaism and Greek philosophy.[24] "European identity" is in this sense "secondary" to the Axial Age and indebted to it, but the long-used term "secondary breakthrough" suggests both too much a line of continuity and too much a line of evolution. In Rémi Brague's view, it is rather the creation of such an "eccentric identity" that marks a breakthrough that explains the later rise of European modernity.

Brague's view, which is strong as a qualification of the standard accounts of axiality, is as contestable as the latter when it is read as a claim to ground a specific continuity of Europe. In competition with the "voie romaine", we can list at least four later major historical transformations, none of which can in any convincing way be derived from either axial or Roman origins: the "first European

[22] For discussions about the simultaneously historical and conceptual, or in other words, substantive and temporal character of modernity, see Yack (1997) and Wagner (2001). In these terms, this section of the paper focuses on the historical and temporal, whereas the following section focuses on the conceptual and substantive.

[23] Eisenstadt (1992b, 283) observes that the connectedness to antiquity is precisely one of the characteristics of Europe.

[24] Brague (1992).

revolution" early in the second millennium,[25] which already caught Max Weber's attention; the Renaissance, indeed a crisis-born attempt at giving oneself a new orientation by looking backwards towards antiquity; the Reformation and the religious wars; and the period around the French Revolution, often referred to as the onset of political modernity.

It is not my intention, though, to propose any counter-narrative here.[26] Rather, the mere listing of these further transformations in their diversity should intuitively suggest that it is difficult to speak of a European trajectory from axiality to modernity in which earlier stages determine, although not the precise outcome, the path that could be taken.[27] In contrast, these ruptures are arguably more adequately interpreted as breaking open a prior configuration through human creativity based on the faculty of imagination. Elements of the cosmologies that have defined earlier configurations are resources available to interpret and resolve a situation conceived as problematic, rather than determinants of the outcome of a transformation. The actual outcome then becomes something that is neither necessary nor impossible; these transformative situations are moments of experienced historical contingency.

Secondly, a look at "post-axial" Europe is also of particular relevance in this context because the Axial Age debate is predominantly a European debate, in particular in its more philosophical forms.[28] As proposed earlier, it can be interpreted as a debate about a crisis and a search for reorientation. The features that are highlighted in the Axial Age—reflexivity, historicity, agentiality, but also the more problematic ones about an other, possible word and the textual guidance towards it—are precisely those that are seen as lost, indeed repeatedly lost in European history. Very schematically, the losses can be associated with the resolutions of the critical transformative situations: the establishment of a Christian Roman Empire; the building of what is often called the modern state system after

[25] Moore (2000).

[26] Elsewhere, we have taken first steps to elaborate a narrative of European political history in terms of changing balances between basic commitments; see Friese and Wagner (2003).

[27] As in the theory of path dependency in contemporary social science.

[28] Presumably such a statement about an intellectual ambit is not objectionable despite the fact that residence or citizenship of some key contributors are not European.

the Treaty of Westphalia; the establishment of nation-states after the Revolution. After the high-points of reflexivity, historicity and agentiality achieved during the Greek era of the *polis* (and to some degree the Roman Republic); early modern Europe culminating in Renaissance humanism and republicanism; and the era of the Enlightenment culminating in the democratic revolutions, each time these consolidated political forms marked a step away from the salient features of axiality. This observation leads me to the final point of my discussion, the relation between axiality and the concept of modernity.

Axiality and Modernity

In short, my suggestion is that one can well observe spatio-temporal constellations at various points in world-history that are marked by the features of axiality. Such constellations may also cluster at certain times, among others the Eurasian Axial Age, but they occur in a wide range of times and spaces. Rather than indicating the rise of a novel historical stage of a civilization, they are specific of periods of major societal transformation. Thus, I prefer to speak, if at all, about "axial transformations", which are then marked by these features, rather than about an "Axial Age", in which these features become institutionalized and, thus, turn into a common *acquis* of variously "modernizing" civilizations. In other words, it seems erroneous to assume that reflexivity, historicity and agentiality are being institutionalized during those transformations. Even and especially for the core area of the Axial Age debate, the one of the monotheistic religions, I see the consolidation and codification of those religious doctrines as a relative loss of a sense of reflexivity, historicity and agentiality, or maybe better: as a channelling of these modes of consciousness into tightly circumscribed forms.[29] This is not to say necessarily that there has been no "historical learning" at all.[30]

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[29] As Jaspers (1968[1949]), 5 put it: 'The age that saw all these developments […] cannot be regarded as a simple upward movement. […] When the age lost its creativeness, a process of dogmatic fixation and levelling-down took place.'

[30] Kurt Raaflaub, for instance, in this volume, rightly insists on such learning for the Greek transformation—but also on better grounds than one could for other axial experiences (see also Arnason, 2001b). And Assmann, J. (1992) allows for

However, at no time and no place have reflexivity, historicity and agentiality been securely gained—in a truly "modern" reading, they open up the issue of contingency, and societal consolidation seems to have been always about, among other things, the limitation of contingency.[31]

This is where the debate is related to the "onset of modernity" in the conventional reading, the late eighteenth and early nineteenth century. The era of the Enlightenment is centrally concerned with reflexivity, historicity, agentiality and with reasons for assuming that other worlds are possible. It culminates in the revolutions, whereas, in contrast, the European experience after the revolutions should be read as being preoccupied with finding means to cope with contingency. The rise of the social sciences as well as the rise of the political ideologies of the nineteenth century indicate attempts at building safely compartmentalized tracks across the suddenly emerging—and initially empty—space towards the "open horizon of the future", to paraphrase Reinhart Koselleck. Europe around 1800 can thus be described in terms of an "axial transformation", and that transformation ushers in new institutional forms of polities. The process mirrors rather precisely the description of the Axial Age and its aftermath, according to the Axial Age hypothesis.

If that is so, then we learn from studying the "axial" period first of all about the character of major societal transformations. To say that reflexivity, historicity and agentiality are key components of all—or most of—those historical events that in their aftermath can be described as major social transformations is, however, almost a truism—unless social transformations are more endured than enacted, if provoked by natural catastrophe or by invasion and colonization, for instance, even though there is hardly ever mere endurance. Nevertheless, the fact that the Axial Age has been described in precisely these terms, and that such description has been proposed in our own age of "modernity", which is allegedly marked by a particularly pronounced availability of these beliefs, is significant. In this light, the Axial Age hypothesis is at core a "modern" interpretation of social transformations in apparent gradual preparation of modernity, an interpretation, thus, which endows modernity with

different degrees of generalizability of key concepts, without accepting the idea of a breakthrough to universalism.

[31] See Wagner (2001) chaps 1 and 2 for a general such argument.

suitable "origins". Such statement, valid as it may be, creates an interpretive circle from which it is impossible to escape.

These observations raise other questions about modernity, though, which can only be mentioned here. Contrary to a standard narrative about modernity, our observations suggest that any strong belief in, or commitment to, reflexivity, historicity, agentiality and the possibility of different worlds tends to be transitory, a feature of a liminal situation, as one may want to say, and has never been truly institutionalized. Enlightenment, to paraphrase both Kant and Foucault,[32] marks an "exit" from a state of serfdom by means of an ethos of interrogation of the world, but it does not indicate the entry into a safely established world of modernity. Thus, what is often called the onset of modernity, if this is meant to be a historical term to signal the beginning of an era, is not very well described and conceptualized.

Palomar's exposure to approaches to archaeology concludes as follows: "Just as the school group had disappeared around a corner, the stubborn voice of the little teacher continued: "it is not true, what the gentleman said. We do not know what they mean."

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[32] Kant (1965[1784]), Foucault (1984).

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BETWEEN TRADITION AND CHRISTIANITY: THE AXIAL AGE IN THE PERSPECTIVE OF BÉLA HAMVAS

ARPAD SZAKOLCZAI

This paper aims to summarise ideas of Béla Hamvas (1897-1968) that are pertinent to Axial Age discussions. Hamvas was the Hungarian Borges or Eliade, a person of extraordinary erudition mastering 17 languages, including Latin, Greek, Hebrew, Sanskrit, Persian and Chinese. He was at home in the secular and sacred literature of almost any time and place. As even his name is hardly known outside Hungary, I must begin with a short overview of his life and works.

Béla Hamvas: Life and Works

Hamvas' obscurity might easily be explained. In 1948, shortly after the Communists engineered their takeover, he lost his job and was eventually forced to become a manual labourer. Until the mid-1980s the publication of his work was strictly forbidden in Hungary. A careful approach, however, reveals a more complex narrative.

Although a complete biography of Hamvas is now available in Hungarian,[1] many basic facts of his life remain undocumented. This is true, to a great extent, because his house and with it most material records of his life were destroyed in January 1945. The full story is even more uncanny—capturing, as if in a nutshell, the tenor of his life: during the siege of Budapest he went out for a short walk, he returned to a bomb crater in the place of his home.

As these episodes already signal, one could hardly find a better contemporary example for philosophy being a way of life, not just a matter of doctrine, as argued by Hadot or Foucault. Hamvas was

[1] Darabos (2001).

forced to move through his entire life, from infancy up to old age. Born in Eperjes (now Presov in East Slovakia), the family moved to Pozsony (Bratislava) when he was a year old. In 1919, just after WW I, they were forced to immigrate to Hungary. Hamvas also had his war experience, serving in the army thrice, being wounded each time and even earning a medal that he duly refused to accept.

The magic number three accompanied him through life. Between the wars, he had three major occupations. He began as a student in Budapest, probably not finishing his degree, due to disillusionment with academic life in "Christian nationalist" Hungary. His main "reading experiences"[2] were Kierkegaard and especially Nietzsche, then Jaspers, Camus and Heidegger, but also Russian novelists and thinkers like Dostoevsky, Tolstoy, Berdiaev, Shestov, Merezhkovsky and Soloviev. He worked as a journalist between 1923 and 1927, leaving due to endemic corruption and cynicism, and became a librarian. He read voraciously, accumulated a formidable mass of notes and wrote a series of manuscripts, most of which remained unpublished and were destroyed in January 1945. With his friend Károly Kerényi, the well known mythologist, he founded a journal *Sziget* (Island), in an effort to reinvigorate Hungarian intellectual life in 1935. Although they succeeded in recruiting major figures, *Sziget* had a very short life.

During the Second World War—in his mid-40's—he was again called three times for military duty. Far from becoming disheartened, Hamvas used furloughs between two service calls, and the time between August 1943 and February 1944 to complete the first part of *Scientia Sacra*, an overview of the wisdom contained in the entire sacred tradition of mankind, a copy of which luckily survived with friends. It was first published in 1988.

Hamvas understood his miraculous escape and the destruction of all his belongings, coinciding with the liberation of Budapest in February 1945 and the vanquishing of the previous regime, as an opportunity for rebirth. He began the most productive period of his life. He wrote and published extensively and with success, including *Anthologia humana*, an anthology of the wisdom of 5000 years, in a third edition by 1948, a translation of the *Fragments* of Heraclitus, and a book on modern art written together with his second wife

[2] For the concept, see Szakolczai (1998), 29-30.

Katalin Kemény. He also edited a book series which aimed to make accessible in Hungarian the most important works of contemporary thought—among others, Mannheim, Jaspers and Heidegger.

The era, however, was short lived. Hamvas was viciously attacked in the Communist press. He sought support from Georg Lukacs, thinking that he, a former associate of Weber and Simmel, was after all a European intellectual. Lukacs, however, not only dismissed his work as "untimely", but in 1947 he joined the accusatory chorus. Shortly after the Communist takeover, Hamvas was dismissed from his library position. He took this as a novel opportunity, retiring to cultivate his garden and finishing between 1948 and 1951 his major novel *Carnival*, first published in 1985 and within years generally acknowledged as *the* major novel of its time and place. After finishing the book, partly in order to make a living and avoid police harassment, but also to "go under" and experience fully the "new world", he took up a job as an unskilled manual labourer. Between 1951 and 1964 he worked in three newly built socialist power plants, first in Inota, on the outskirts of the ugly socialist town Várpalota (literally, "castle palace"); then in Tiszapalkonya, just a few kilometres away from one of the most revolting new socialist towns, aptly called Leninváros (the "city of Lenin"); and finally in Bokod, near another desolate socialist creature, Oroszlány (Oroszlány, ironically means "Russian girl" in Hungarian). Through these experiences Hamvas continued working actively. He travelled on his free days to Budapest to change clothes and books. He wrote a multi-volume collection of essays entitled "Pathmos", a series of translations and commentaries on ancient texts, and started work on the second part of *Scientia Sacra*, devoted to Christianity.

The forced transfer to Bokod, at the age of 65, proved to be fatal. His work on the manuscript was interrupted, and he would not gain sufficient strength to complete it.

Re-assessing the Axial Age

Hamvas never used the term "Axial Age", or "Axis Time", but at the centre of his work, as is explicitly stated in the opening paragraphs of *Scientia Sacra*, was the concern with understanding the scope and significance of the events associated with that period.

The novelty Hamvas brought to the discussion can be compared

with Huizinga's insight concerning the end of the Middle Ages.[3] Previously, epitomised by the classic work of Jacob Burckhardt, the Renaissance had been considered to be a new beginning. But Huizinga suddenly came to the recognition that the Renaissance was more the end of an epoch, a Baudelairian "*fleur du mal*", than a new beginning. Since Jaspers, the Axial Age had been seen as a radical break with the past, marked by new elites, institutions, and transcendental visions. Hamvas, however, argued that the ideas of the Axial Age were not that different from those espoused earlier.

The second difference is a consequence of the first. If the ideas of the Axial Age were less of a novelty, then—instead of emphasising the break—it becomes important to reconsider the wisdom that was thought to have been replaced in the Axial Age. In other words, the question of "tradition" must be posed again. Much of the work of Hamvas was therefore concerned with a reconstruction of the ancient wisdom as preserved in the various Sacred Books of mankind.

Finally, this reversal of perspective also helps to shed new light on Christianity. The original concern of Jaspers, countering Hegel, was that the rise of Christianity cannot be asserted as the turning point of history as it is culturally specific and could not gain general appeal. Hamvas, however, argued that the sacred tradition of mankind is the same everywhere; and Christianity only represents a return to and reaffirmation of the values of tradition.

The Axial Age as Dissolution of Order

For Hamvas, the Axial Age was not a sovereign, autonomous development, but a symptom: a product of unprecedented confusion, chaos and decline. It grew out of a truly epochal event, a widespread collapse and dissolution of order. Around 600 BCE "a disturbance occurred in the order of the sacral values of being"; when words and deeds became separated, and measure and balance had been replaced by excess and *hubris*.[4]

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[3] See Huizinga (1990[1919]). Among his contemporaries, the thought of Hamvas shows many parallels with Voegelin and Elias.

[4] See Hamvas (1995/6), II, 274; III, 17; I, 206. The collected works of Hamvas, planned for 26 volumes, are currently being published. I make occasional use of Andrea Kibédi's manuscript English translation of the first part of *Scientia Sacra*, kindly made accessible to me by the curators.

The recognition of this major disturbance is not an insight particular to Hamvas. It is shared by all of the main protagonists of the Axial Age. The classical Hebrew "prophecies of doom" are well known, though often considered to be phenomena of merely local concern. Hamvas thus starts his main work by quoting extensively from three other, contemporary but geographically vastly distant protagonists of the Axial Age, the Buddha, Lao-Tse and Heraclitus.

The long passage quoted from the Buddha formulates the experience of dissolution of order in the form of a mythical account.[5] The lines from Lao-Tse are more concise, and are well worth quoting in full: "People have abandoned Tao;/ Thus came about morality and duty./ Cleverness and knowledge have come about;/ Thus originated the great lies./ Blood relations have drawn apart;/ Thus came about filial duty and love./ Chaos and disorder have dominated the states;/ Thus came about the faithful servants."[6] He also evokes the well-known diagnosis by Heraclitus of his contemporaries as sleepwalkers, and of the age as a period of unprecedented blindness and stupidity.[7]

In his later book *Pathmos* Hamvas further elaborated upon the character of the period, approaching the sense of liminality. The periods of crisis that separate main historical epochs are by no means harmless. We do not simply change our house, but our skin. But these periods also offer an opportunity: "in a time of crisis between two epochs, when man has not yet really arrived there but is no longer here, he can see beyond the taken for granted shell of the self".[8] Elsewhere he compares such periods to a narrow valley, emphasising their extreme danger and importance.[9]

This renders visible the true novelty of the Axial Age. Though the ideas are not new, they are formulated in novel ways. Two of these modalities are central: the Book and the Sacral Subject.[10] Previously, the teachings had been transmitted orally, their written expression was strictly forbidden. Now, due to the threatening disorder, this was deemed necessary for preservation. Simultaneously

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[5] Hamvas (1995/6), I, 16-8.
[6] Ibid., 19.
[7] Ibid., 18, 43, 83; Hamvas (1992), I, 125, 243; Hamvas (1996), 48.
[8] Hamvas (1992), I, 181.
[9] Ibid., 186, 328, 461. On liminality, see Turner (1967, 1969).
[10] Hamvas (1995/6), I, 67-83.

the wisdom was embodied in concrete personalities: sages, lawgivers, prophets or founders of religion. In Foucaldian terminology, the "objectification" of sacred wisdom in books was accompanied by a twin process of "subjectification". This took place within a few generations. In China, Lao-Tse is still a shadowy figure, while Confucius is clearly historical. In Greece, Orpheus belongs to the world of myths; Pythagoras stands between myth and history, while Heraclitus is fully historical. The examples could be multiplied from Israel to India.

This order evoked in books and traditions is sacred, as it is eternal, handed down through revelation.[11] This means, first of all, that the age-old intellectual efforts to invent, discover or create order, constitutive of Western philosophy at least since Hobbes, are irrelevant, merely tactical plots, as the order of things is always already there.[12] Genuine order cannot be produced by an abstract, analytical mind. Hamvas explicitly set up his ideas against the three main activities of the speculative intellect: analytical dissection, the requirement of proof, and doubt. Instead of separating and dissecting, it is necessary to consider things in their interdependence.[13] Furthermore, the sign of a genuine order is that it announces. It does not prove, as it does not need proofs; it is not Sophist. Hamvas refers to an aphorism of Vauvenargues: when an argument needs proof, it is a sign that it was poorly formulated.[14] Finally, doubt, the main principle of Cartesian philosophy, just as Kant's dichotomies and Hegel's dualistic dialectics, belongs to the realm of the number two, is thus immediately problematic.[15] The thought of Hamvas is primarily based on the numbers one and three. He frequently referred to the fragment of Heraclitus, *hen panta einai* ("all is one"),[16] and considered such experience of oneness to be central for faith, confidence and fidelity.[17]

Hamvas did not champion indiscriminate credulity. On the contrary, he considered a proper sense of discrimination, or spiritual

[11] Ibid., II, 378, Hamvas (1996), 5; Hamvas (1992), II, 180-81.
[12] Hamvas (1995/6), I, 233; Hamvas (1992), II, 230-31.
[13] Hamvas (1995/6), I, 249-51; II, 169. This closely corresponds to the word and spirit of the sociology of Simmel and Elias.
[14] Hamvas (1992), II, 181.
[15] Hamvas (1995/6), II, 199.
[16] Ibid., I, 43; see also pp. 36, 169.
[17] Ibid., II, 18, 35-6; III, 109.

discernment, to be central.[18] But genuine, meaningful, significant knowledge, that gains access to the true order of things, has the character of understanding and not analysis or criticism. Understanding means to put things back to their place.[19] It is not cognitive, rather recognitive.[20] He is highly sceptical of the value of merely cognitive activities and properties: the accumulation of an enormous sum of mostly unconnected facts, a main feature of positivism; but also of mere "lucidity", a combination of blind, impersonal, abstract, sterile, and materialistic rationality and spiritless, power-thirsty order.[21] Even further, lucidity is demonic, as it renders possible the smooth deployment of an abstract, mechanised power apparatus.[22] True knowledge is not based on consciousness—an organ of stupefaction—but wakeful sight or *vidya*.[23]

Recognition and understanding of order have prerequisites: sensitivity, receptivity or attunement. Sensitivity is tightly linked to fidelity and faith. Faith is not credulity, rather openness, sensitivity and attunement to phenomena that lie beyond sense perception.[24] Such a sensitivity or receptivity assumes the openness and softness of the soul, a readiness to receive, presupposing passivity.[25] Activity, especially frenetic, hectic, hasty activity, driven by a thirst for life deadens such sensitivity, paving the way for the rule of the closed self. Sensitivity is an attribute of Being, not of Life; as "being is nothing other than the intensive sensitivity of the soul".[26] Furthermore, and following Plato, this is not only real, but it is the only reality, as "the highest stage of being is not knowledge, but sensitivity".[27]

Whilst the main prerequisite of sensitivity is passivity, it can be explicitly enhanced by consciously developing one's state of

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[18] Ibid., I, 20; III, 124, 184; Hamvas (1992), II, 235.
[19] Hamvas (1995/6), I, 306.
[20] On recognition, see especially the work of Pizzorno (1987, 1991).
[21] Hamvas (1992), I, 137-51, 155, 346-50; on order without spirit, see also Voegelin (1999), 153-55.
[22] Hamvas (1992), I, 297, 351, 448-49.
[23] Hamvas (1995/6), I, 30-1, 53-5. The term is the etymological root of "Oedipus", as analysed by Foucault. For details, see Szakolczai (2003), 147.
[24] Hamvas (1995/6), II, 35, 169. Trivial examples include love, harmony, sincerity or benevolence, that each must be re-cognised, not just known.
[25] Ibid., I, 307-8; II, 343.
[26] Ibid., I, 47.
[27] Ibid., I, 55.

attunement.[28] Hamvas stressed the reference to music, even sounds. Music has a central role in cultivating such sensitivity. It also illuminates the oral character of the archaic sacred tradition, its exclusive transmission from mouth to ear, through living, personal voice. Ascetic techniques also play a crucial role in developing such sensitivity, as the main purpose of asceticism is not to transform the human being, by torturing or tormenting the body, rather to bring out this sensitivity, by removing the deposits of a previous, corrupted life; to restore the unity and harmony to a human being that became naked, being literally besides himself.[29] Such practices are difficult. But difficulty is the sign of relevance, and it is one of the central terms in his vocabulary.[30] Just as in the case of order, the difficulty is not intellectual, rather existential. The rules of a good, truthful life are very simple. It is only difficult to live according to them.

Passing through the threshold between a disordered and an ordered life is not easy. It requires a single act, which is not cognitive but re-cognitive. In the thought of the Axial Age, this is called wakefulness or awakening. The term is central for the thought of the Buddha or Heraclitus, and Hamvas interpreted in this sense the last words of Socrates, evoking the cock, the animal associated with the wake-up cry.[31] It is also placed at the centre of education in the archaic traditions, in the form of initiation ceremonies, a central focus of the book.[32]

The loss of order is characterised by a series of conceptual pairs, the first being the opposition between Being and Life.[33] Being is the realm of peace, calmness and serenity; of joyfulness and shining; and primarily of balance, harmony and measure.[34] In ordered being the sacral hierarchies are respected; things are in their place; as the measure is God, not man.[35] This order is epitomised by a famous

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[28] Hamvas (1992), 5-6; the term is central for Heidegger.
[29] Hamvas (1995/6), I, 307-09; III, 90.
[30] Ibid., I, 317; Hamvas (1996), 10-2.
[31] Hamvas (1995/6), I, 30-3, 45, 190.
[32] It is the title of book four; see ibid., I, 190, 281, 329; II, 20-31, 66, 142-44; Hamvas (1992), I, 477-80. The affinity with the work of Turner on rites of passage and liminality is close.
[33] The reference to Heidegger and the oblivion of being is explicit; see Hamvas (1992), I, 28.
[34] Hamvas (1995/6), I, 25, 298; Hamvas (1996), 5; Hamvas (1992), I, 472.
[35] Hamvas (1995/6), I, 326, Hamvas (1992), II, 230.

Greek statue, the Delphic chariot driver. For Hamvas, the features of this figure, his simple but ordered clothes, the gesture of his hands, and especially his confident, sharp, direct and clear gaze, embody the serene calmness of an archaic ruler.[36]

The description is followed by a short list of cross-references to similar figures in the sacred tradition.[37] These two pages illustrate the splendid width and depth of Hamvas's knowledge. The figure is first compared to the "inner chariot driver" (*antarjamin*) of the Vedas; then to Zarathustra, who identified himself as the first priest, driving the chariot (*ratha eszthar*). This is followed by further references to the Hindu tradition, then to the Cabalistic Zohar, and further to Egypt, Greece, Rome and Peru, evoking both texts and rituals. This extraordinary feat of erudition is closed by a quotation of Li Ki: "The art of government is the driving of a chariot".[38]

Life is the realm of rush, hurry, haste and harassment.[39] In the footsteps of Bergson, he identifies being as open, while life as closed.[40] Such a scenery, however, is internally driven; by human beings who desperately seek to satisfy their wishes, dreams and desires; by a "thirst for life", through greed and lust. Life is "the meaningless and disordered swarming of individual 'I'-s", *samsara* in Hindu thought and *ananke* in Greek, stimulated through the imposed formation of images in the mind.[41] At the start of his major work Hamvas evokes a lengthy lamentation of Pythagoras about the "unhappy people" who don't realise that the "good is right beside them", and are shoved like huge rolling balls, as "since their birth they are persecuted everywhere by a fatal confusion that chases them up and down, and nobody understands why".[42] This life is epitomised by Nietzsche and Goethe,[43] who came to glorify individual arbitrariness and its main manifestation, the single deed. In opposition to this, Hamvas evokes

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[36] Hamvas (1995/6), II, 287; see also I, 328; II, 347, 357.

[37] Ibid., II, 287-89.

[38] Ibid., II, 288. This evokes Foucault's last conceptualisation of power, playing on the various meanings of the French word *conduite*; see Foucault (1982), 220-21.

[39] Hamvas (1995/6), I, 16; Hamvas (1992), II, 165-68.

[40] Hamvas (1995/6), I, 28, 48, 58, 173. This again exhibits many parallels with Voegelin and Elias; for details, see Szakolczai (2000).

[41] Ibid., I, 62, 303-04; II, 48.

[42] Ibid., I, 18-9.

[43] Hamvas (1992), I, 129-32.

a phrase from Bataille: "'toute action fait d'un homme un être fragmentaire'".[44]

The other pairs elaborate various aspects of the Being vs. Life opposition. One of the most important, the title of the first chapter of *Scientia Sacra*, and no doubt the most controversial is the opposition between the "golden age" and "apocalypse". Hamvas was aware that he swam against the current, but he was accustomed to this. The reality of the "golden age" must be accepted first due to the weight of the persons who pronounced it. Zarathustra, Buddha, Lao-Tse and Heraclitus were such personalities as have hardly existed since. If they pronounced the "golden age" as real, it had to be so.[45] Furthermore, awareness of the "golden age" is present, in an indestructible manner, inside every single human being, and can be activated by the Platonic anamnesis.[46] Finally, the idea is not restricted to classical antiquity. It also existed in Peru, where a secret golden garden was hidden behind the main Temple. "The golden garden is the archaic image of the world, which lives, ineradicably, in the world".[47]

The apocalypse is the opposite of the Golden Garden. It stands for a closed, isolated and fragmented existence; it is Being broken into pieces. Apocalyptic thought is associated since Zarathustra with number two, with the struggle of the fragments.[48] Broken (*tört*) existence is the realm of history (*történelem*). The consequence of broken unity is the closing towards the main directions of Being, a manifestation of the Heraclitean sleep-walking—closed inside nature and history, losing touch with the metaphysical, even the immediacy of human existence, of community. The result is the divinisation of the closed individual self, living in isolation and loneliness, thus developing an excessive inclination for reflexivity.[49] This human being, so close to Elias's *homo clausus*, is also naked and defenceless, continuously driven by bad consciousness to defend oneself.[50]

Being is also the realm of the *idyllic*. The best characterisation of

[44] Ibid., I, 132.
[45] Hamvas (1995/6), I, 24.
[46] Ibid. II, 26.
[47] Ibid., I, 321.
[48] Ibid., I, 28; II, 207.
[49] Ibid., I, 58-62.
[50] Hamvas (1992), II, 151.

idyll is contained at the beginning of the second part of *Pathmos*.[51] Idyll is the archaic state of mankind, not necessarily the original or the oldest, and its recognition by no means involves nostalgia. It is best evoked in a few special works of art—in some paintings of Corot or Raphael, in the music of Bach or Mozart, in the poems of Hölderlin or Keats, or in the *Midsummer Night's Dream*. It is the reference point for our life, and "whenever it appears in a human being or a work, in a scenery or a sound, everybody knows that this is where we are really at home".[52] This also defines the main task of thought and art: it is to evoke or reawaken this realm of the idyll, returning to the "golden age" of mankind.[53] If the opposite of being at home is the experience of living in an alien world,[54] the opposite of idyll is the demonic: a conscious effort to destroy the idyllic, driven by an excessive self-importance built up by an isolated, closed self.[55]

Another opposition lies between the spiritual and the knightly. Hamvas here approaches the diagnosis of expanding empires, driven by knightly virtues and not the classic search for order.[56] Particularly important is his characterisation of Plato and Nietzsche.[57] Plato was the last "spiritual person" in the European tradition; after him came the rule of warriors; while Nietzsche was the last in this line of kshatriya thinkers, embodying this modality of thought—as the modern, lucid type of man is a depraved knight—[58] but also taking it beyond the threshold.

The Task

The diagnosis of disorder defined a simple task for Axial Age thinkers: a call for return to measure, balance and order.[59] It implies sacral,

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[51] Ibid., II, 11-4.
[52] Hamvas (1995/6), I, 11.
[53] Ibid., I, 335-36.
[54] Hankiss (2001).
[55] Hamvas (1992), II, 148-63.
[56] Ibid., I 119-24. For the best study of the links between the Axial Age and the rise of global empires, see Voegelin (1974); for details, see Szakolczai (2000), 182-85, and (2003), 83-91.
[57] Hamvas (1992), I, 52-4, 62, 141, 492.
[58] Ibid., I, 147; this corresponds to Elias's (1994[1939]) interpretation of the civilizing process.
[59] Hamvas (1995/6), I, 298; II, 166.

cultic activity, the spreading of the eternal light; it is to restore the original meaning of words,[60] or a return to *logos*.[61] It emphatically does not signify the pursuit of individual salvation,[62] rather the task of transforming the world again into a golden garden.[63]

Hamvas uses three key words to capture the character of this activity. The first word, *asha*, meaning true and just order, is from the Zoroastrian tradition.[64] Here a longer quote illustrates best the point: "Asha is the mysterious substance which increases as a consequence of every true word, every good deed, every deep thought somewhere in the depths, in the heart of the world and in the spirit of God. If someone loves deeply, he increases asha; if someone creates a beautiful work, he increases asha; if someone cultivates his field with care, he increases asha; if someone prays from the heart, he increases asha. But every dark, deceitful, selfish, false thought, word and deed diminishes asha; asha becomes less with every sin, the very asha which is more important for the existence of the world than food, and more significant than sunshine".[65]

The second is the Greco-Latin concept of "grace" (Greek *charis*, Latin *gratia*).[66] The term is identical to asha, it signifies the unearthing and distilling of the gold that has been buried in the world. More specifically, it is tied to the activity of giving and receiving. The analysis evidently relies on the work of the Florentine neo-Platonists, as represented by the *Primavera* of Botticelli, or the Three Graces of Raphael. Graceful life means a life of giving, the fire of self-sacrifice and self-renouncement, as found not only in ascetic practices but also in erotic embrace;[67] but also the ability to receive, assuming sensitivity and attunement. The "Three Graces" represent the circle of giving, receiving, and reciprocating with abundant surplus. Such a spiralling, ever increasing movement is the exact opposite of the spiral of ungraceful egotism and rush that rules the days.

The third key word is "love". Hardly present in the first part of

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[60] Ibid., I, 335-36; III, 188. This idea was central for Foucault's last *Collège de France* courses on *parrhesia*. For details, see Szakolczai (2003), 172.
[61] Ibid., II, 19, 250; Hamvas (1992), I, 215, 468.
[62] Hamvas (1995/6), I, 267, 303-04, 307, 314.
[63] Ibid., I, 244, 275, 298, 326; Hamvas (1992), I, 461.
[64] Hamvas (1995/6), I, 265, 270-72.
[65] Ibid., I, 271.
[66] Ibid., I, 296-98, 323-26.
[67] Ibid., I, 323.

Scientia Sacra, it became central in the second part, written two decades later. Here we reach the last stage of the thought of Hamvas, related to his re-assessment of Christianity.

Christianity as Return to Tradition

The experiences of his life predisposed Hamvas, like most members of his generation, to a hostility towards Christianity. He found the "Christian-National" regime ruling Hungary between the World Wars intolerable and suffocating; and his central reading experience was Nietzsche. Accordingly, as mentioned in the above, in the first part of *Scientia Sacra* there is hardly a reference to Christianity—nevertheless, Hamvas had begun to change his mind.

While the rise of Christianity does not belong to the Axial Age, a few paragraphs must be devoted to this theme, not only to do justice to the thought of Hamvas, but also to solve a contradiction in the first part. Hamvas characterised (though using different words) the "Axial Age" as a "liminal" period, ending with Plato; but he also argued that since then we have lived in an Apocalyptic Age. His reassessment of Christianity helps to solve this puzzle.

The basic position of the second part of *Scientia Sacra* is extremely simple. The teachings of Christianity do not represent a novelty, as they are fundamentally identical with the teachings of the earlier sacred traditions. This is why it is universal in scope and potentiality. Christianity is therefore not revolutionary, as it calls for the same return to measure and order of the other Axial Age traditions. But it is radical, teaching a relentless fight against all sources of disorder, corruption and confusion.

It has, however, one element that—if not completely different from the other traditions—still represents a novel emphasis, and this is the importance attributed to love. Though traces are present in archaic thought, especially Zoroastrian asha,[68] the Hindu, Hebrew, Chinese and Greek traditions ignore love as giving order and measure by establishing the unity of Being.[69] It only becomes a central value in the Gospels; indeed, there the world created by love is superior even to the original creation.[70]

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[68] Ibid., I, 173-76, 240.
[69] Hamvas (1992), II, 200.
[70] Hamvas (1995/6), III, 171.

The problem of the corruption of order and of the right measure is solved by love, as "love is the measure of being".[71] Love solves the paradox of freedom and constraint, as love liberates one through bondage itself.[72] Love can restore order, as it is a kind of power; furthermore, a power stronger than any other. It is a power very close to the power of grace.[73] It is also a kind power; not weak, rather so strong that it can afford to be soft and kind; a power that is happy and joyful, not severe, strict, or rigorous; it is full of forgivingness. This is the *exousia* of the Gospels.[74]

This superior power is vulnerable. Due to its softness, sensitivity and receptivity, it can be attacked and discredited as weak, sentimental, a mere priestly lie; it can be slandered and defiled.[75] Such attacks are all the more relentless and spiteful as love is the opposite of the demonic.

Time and again, in its struggle against love and the idyllic, the demonic might seem to gain the upper hand. Still, its efforts are hopeless, as ultimately all slanders rebound from the power of love. The concluding words of Hamvas, otherwise so full of apocalyptic tonality, are most surprising: the power of love and gracefulness is invincible; "the corruption of Being simply doesn't stand a chance".[76]

Concluding Remark

This is also where we reach the end of the intellectual and spiritual journey of Hamvas. The journey was truly momentous, as it covered, under the most adverse conditions, the extant wisdom of mankind, mobilising 17 languages to encompass 5,000 years and five continents. Its conclusion was all the more surprising as it started on the footsteps of Nietzsche, the most adamant of all critics of Christian love. In a certain way, however, this end result may be profoundly Nietzschean in spirit, following the logic of eternal re-

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[71] Ibid., III, 169.
[72] Ibid., III, 170.
[73] Ibid., III, 102. Hamvas mentions Simone Weil and Empedocles (in ibid., 168), but the analysis also evokes Weber's concept of charismatic power. The relationship between charismatic and demonic powers, using the figure of the trickster, has been studied by Horvath (1998, 2000).
[74] Ibid., III, 107.
[75] The original meaning of *diabolos* is slanderer.
[76] Hamvas (1992), II, 242; last page of his last work.

currence. We can close with the concluding words of the last part of Pathmos: "at the end of times, they say, the beginning returns".[77]

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[77] Ibid.

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PART TWO

THE ANCIENT NEAR EAST AND ITS AXIAL PERIPHERIES

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INTRODUCTION: ARCHAIC BACKGROUNDS AND AXIAL BREAKTHROUGHS

JOHANN P. ARNASON, S.N. EISENSTADT AND BJÖRN WITTROCK

It seems clear that the contrast between ancient Greece and ancient Israel on the one hand, and their Near Eastern predecessors and neighbours on the other, was crucial to the first interpretations of the Axial Age. Although the elusive case of Zoroastrianism (and speculation about its influence on both Greek and Judaic traditions) tended to complicate the picture, the older civilizations of the Fertile Crescent could more easily be seen as counter-examples to the achievements of two uniquely creative cultures which exemplified the axial breakthrough. Self-perpetuating archaic patterns on one side contrasted with epoch-making openings to new cultural horizons on the other. Historical research has shown that this view must be relativized in several respects; this has been of significant importance for debates on the Axial Age and its civilizational impact, but a whole range of additional questions calls for further discussion. This is not a matter of denying the originality of the two paradigmatic cases; rather, an in-depth study of their historical context should lead to more adequate understanding of their specific experiences and self-articulations.

Most obviously (as noted in the introduction to this book), the historicity of these ancient Near Eastern civilizations, their developing traditions and their diverse trajectories have become more adequately understood and must be taken into account if we want to see the Greek and Judaic innovations in proper perspective. Another set of questions, more prominent and controversial in recent debates, has to do with the constitutive relationship of the two axial transformations to the archaic centres. From a geopolitical and—at first—geocultural point of view, Greece and Israel were peripheral to the much older major civilizations of the Near East;

they interacted with and borrowed from the Egyptian, Mesopotamian, Syrian and Anatolian worlds in a variety of ways, and the innovations most indicative of cultural autonomy can be understood as ways of self-demarcation vis-à-vis the established traditions of the region. In Greece, intensive borrowing of cultural themes and techniques from eastern neighbours—significant enough for some historians to have described it as an "orientalizing revolution"—was accompanied by the formation of the *polis* as a radical departure from Near Eastern political models, and by the same token a precondition for more distinctive cultural developments. In Israel, the axial turn seems to have had more to do with the defence of cultural identity and survival against acute threats from Near Eastern imperial powers; as Jan Assmann has shown, the resultant radicalization of monotheism found expression in a cultural memory which stressed the differentiation from Egypt, with a mode of articulation indebted to Mesopotamian sources.

A further issue in recent historical work is the chronology of transformations in Greece and Israel. It seems clear that closer examination of the two cases has tended to shift its focus in opposite directions: a reappraisal of Archaic Greece draws attention to early and decisive developments, whereas analysts of ancient Judaism have increasingly stressed the importance of the Exile and the Second Temple. But in neither case can this be seen as simply a matter of redating a breakthrough. The questions to be reconsidered concern the relationship between key episodes and more protracted transformations. Finally, a clearer understanding of distinctions between two very different patterns of cultural innovation has emerged. A strong emphasis on similarities (supposedly inherent in a search for new paradigms of order) was characteristic of earlier interpretations; this approach was particularly evident in Parsons's discussion of the two "seedbed societies", and to some extent prefigured by Voegelin's more detailed analysis. But the historical constellations in question diverged far too widely for such views to be plausible. In the Greek case, the axial transformation involved complex interactions among politics, religion, poetry and philosophy; modern interpreters have found it difficult to move beyond one-sided perceptions of this pattern. The axial turn in ancient Israel centred on radicalization of monotheism. But this more exclusively focused innovation was at the same time more ambiguous in its long-term implications: although it was directly conducive to a stronger sense of collective identity

and emphatic demarcation from others, the universalistic potential of the core idea—the absolute sovereignty of a unique legislator-god—came to fruition in a religious revolution which broke decisively with the original communal framework. The two monotheistic world religions developed and disputed this broader interpretation. But a whole range of heterodox currents, overshadowed by dominant historical trends and very unequally reflected in available historical evidence, should also be seen as an integral part of the axial field. The cultural patterns that crystallized around ancient Judaism—and in response to its vicissitudes—survived as a separate and significant part of a broader civilizational constellation. In this case, the axial transformation is thus more directly linked to a later multi-civilizational framework than anywhere else.

Finally, a few words should be devoted to the different patterns of continuity that characterize the two axial legacies. The monotheistic traditions—those of Jewish civilization as well as of the two affiliated world religions—gave rise to enduring forms of collective identity and to lasting institutional features, even if the continuities on both levels were also reflected in inherent problems, such as the contested relations between religious authority and rulership. In the Greek case, institutional continuity was much more limited (weakened versions of the *polis* were integral to Hellenistic and Roman civilizational patterns), whereas the long-term intellectual impact was crucial to later traditions and transformations, through both the rationalizing influence upon monotheistic religious cultures and reactivated models of rational inquiry.

The discussion in this section begins with changing perspectives on the ancient Near East. Jan Assmann argues that the standard accounts of a revolutionary transition from pre-axial to axial modes of thought must be revised in light of ongoing historical research. The supposedly pre-axial civilizations, especially ancient Egypt, are now known to have undergone significant changes, not least on the level of religious culture, and a better understanding of their internal transformative potential will help to clarify the background to later innovations in neighbouring cultures drawn into the orbit of established centres; antecedent civilizational dynamics and inter-civilizational encounters are thus shown to be integral to the axial constellation. In this redefined context, the processes previously understood as shifts from compactness to differentiation can now be analyzed in terms of more concrete cultural operations. More spe-

cifically, several landmarks in the intellectual and religious history of ancient Egypt seem to point in an axial direction, even if the results fell short of philosophy and of monotheism in the distinctive Jewish sense. The most obvious cases in point are the idea of a general judgment of the dead, removed from the socio-political sphere to a transcendent sphere of the divine, and the corresponding "discovery of inner man" as a moral instance. This is not to suggest a narrative of linear progress: a radical monotheistic revolution was reversed in a no less radical way. The monotheistic turn which then occurred in ancient Israel was articulated in relation to Egypt, but without any verifiable link to the abortive monotheistic episode. The "Mosaic distinction" between true and false in religion was at the same time a reconfiguration of the relationship between politics and religion: a higher level of autonomy enabled religion to claim superior authority over other spheres in general and the political in particular. On the other hand, this transformation—centred on the transfer of sovereignty from the sacred ruler to a legislator-god—can be understood as a case of semantic relocation, i.e. the transfer of ideas, concepts and values from one sphere to another; such relocations had already occurred in Egypt, but with less radical results.

Piotr Michalowski revisits the ancient Mesopotamian world and stresses the complexity of this large and long-lived civilizational cluster. The tendency to think of Mesopotamia as a historical unit obscures the variety of socio-cultural formations that rose and fell within shifting borders in the course of several millennia. Political structures with some claims to supra-local authority were more fragile than has often been assumed; it is now known that major rearrangements of mythological traditions took place, and we can no longer single out a paradigmatic civilizational text (as Voegelin did with an important but not uniquely representative epic poem, which he and some other scholars mistook for a Babylonian equivalent of Genesis). It has also become clear that trends supposedly characteristic of the Axial Age were more significant in the Mesopotamian context than earlier interpreters wanted to admit; this applies to the question of rationalism as a general but inherently ambiguous orientation, as well as to models of cosmic order. A further aspect to be noted is the prominence of abstract deities in different phases of Mesopotamian religious history. On the other hand, it can still be argued that a weak notion of transcendence and a synthetic-adap-

tive conception of order set Mesopotamian traditions apart from the axial pioneers. In particular, these cultural premises limited the scope of interpretive conflicts and cultural movements that might have embodied them. But the historical evidence is so fragmentary that it leaves some room for uncertainty on this point: in contrast to Egypt, the greater discontinuity of Mesopotamian history and the greater frequency of destructive breakdowns or collisions are reflected in a less exhaustive record. Michalowski's analysis finishes with a reminder of the importance of Mesopotamia in post-axial times. The presence of old traditions in the new guise of fundamentalist heterodox movements has not been taken seriously enough; it seems likely that the influence of such currents was of some importance to the religious countercultures that accompanied the rise of universal religions in the Near East.

For interpretive historians of the Axial Age, Zoroastrianism has been a particularly perplexing and contested subject. Shaul Shaked surveys the historical evidence—more fragmentary and inconclusive than in the other key cases—and suggests some cautious conclusions. Chronological questions are obviously of some importance for our understanding of the relationship between Zoroastrianism and other axial religions; although the most extreme positions—both those that make Zoroaster a contemporary of the Achaemenid founders and those that date his religious reform back to the early second millennium BCE—now seem untenable, there is still room for wide disagreement. As Shaked argues, the most plausible view of Achaemenid religion is that Zoroastrianism and its founder were taken for granted and associated with a vaguely defined earlier period. Very little is known about the pre-Achaemenid phase of Iranian history, and this makes it difficult to assess the historical significance of Zoroastrian beginnings. Some scholars have tried to compensate for this lack of knowledge by detailed comparison with Indian sources, presumably related to a common background; but as Shaked shows, excessive reliance on such approaches has tended to obscure the originality of the early Zoroastrian sources. Their distinctive religious message—more reflective and inward-looking than the Vedic one, based on a combination of monotheistic and dualistic themes, and characterized by notions of creation and eschatology—places them within the broader context of axial transformations, however problematic the specifics may be.

As noted above, ancient Israel has always been regarded as an

exemplary case of axiality. But in that context, one-sided historical perspectives have obscured some aspects of its trajectory and its legacy. The prophetic tradition (or the prophetic minority, as some historians call it) tends to overshadow other transformative episodes and forces, and by the same token, the pre-exilic period is privileged at the expense of Second Temple Judaism. As for the long-term impact of the breakthrough, attention has been focused on the monotheistic world religions that gave a universalistic turn and a broader civilizational scope to Jewish monotheism. From this point of view, the survival of Judaism as a separate tradition in a world dominated by its estranged heirs seemed less relevant to the question of axial sources and their transformative potential.

Two papers on Judaism and its destinies aim at a more balanced picture. Israel Knohl discusses changes to the relationship between priesthood and community during the period of the Second Temple as well as the simultaneous codification of sacred texts and the development of new approaches to them. But these innovations built on older foundations: a current within the priesthood (Knohl describes it as the "Holiness School") had responded to the social, religious and political crisis of the eight century in ways different yet not altogether unrelated to the prophetic minority, and this trend was more directly a harbinger of Second Temple transformations than the anti-ritualism of the prophets. The Holiness School strove to overcome the strict distinction between morality and ritual; at the same time, their writings—incorporated into the Torah—reflect a new concern with social justice. Second Temple Judaism, making the Torah accessible to the people, brought the heritage of the Holiness School into a broader socio-cultural arena and exposed it to more overt controversy. The Pharisees, who enjoyed broad popular support, were the most prominent champions of a reformed relationship between temple, priesthood and people, whereas some of the movements often seen as heterodox—such as the Qumran sect—may have been attempting to revive a more isolationist conception of the sacred law.

S.N. Eisenstadt surveys the historical experience of Judaism as a "de-territorialized" axial civilization. If our understanding of specific directions taken during the Axial Age is necessarily intertwined with views of their historical sequels (there is, in other words, a hermeneutical circle that links interpretations of the origins to analyses of the outcomes), changing perceptions of the latter will affect overall

perspectives on the cases in question. Eisenstadt takes issue with the widely accepted view of Judaism after the destruction of the Second Temple as a stagnant and marginal tradition (Toynbee's "fossilized civilization" and Weber's "pariah people" are two well-known variations on this theme). As he argues, the concept of a "diasporic civilization" is more adequate to the particular form in which Judaism survived and to its specific ways of developing axial potentials. Conflicts between orthodoxy and heterodoxy could not take the same form as in more self-contained social formations with sovereign political centres, but this does not mean that the axial pattern of conflicting interpretations with more or less overtly heterodox tendencies was wholly absent from medieval Judaism. The Halakha (the post-biblical law) should be regarded as a civilizational framework *sui generis*, but its dynamic—and corresponding form of collective identity—can only be understood in an intercivilizational context.

All accounts of the Axial Age have included an emphatic reference to ancient Greece, but a closer look at the Greek record tends to cast doubt on constructions of a uniform pattern (this was evident in Eisenstadt's reflections on the subject, in the context of earlier discussions). Kurt Raaflaub reconsiders the Greek case and stresses the specific parallels as well as the overall contrast with the other key examples. On the one hand, it is easy to show that innovations and transformations of the kind commonly described as axial did occur in Greece; in particular, the freedom to criticize and speculate changed the whole cultural framework. On the other hand, these developments do not fit into the model of a new ontology, centred on a distinction between the transcendental and the mundane. Formulations of the latter type became more common in the terminal phase of the Greek *polis*, and their potential was more fully realized in later combinations with other traditions. But during the most creative phase of Greek history, the dominant pattern was very different. Philosophical and political thought developed along largely separate lines, distinctive and seminal in both cases but not characterized by a common logic. On the political level, a thoroughly this-worldly orientation closely linked to the problems and conflicts of the *polis* is apparent from early on and becomes more emphatic in later texts. Philosophical speculations about the cosmos had a limited impact on political life. Even within the philosophical context, transcendental visions clearly did not play a key role. In short, the Greek experience highlights the need for more diversified interpre-

tations of the Axial Age, with stronger emphasis on multiple factors which did not interact in the same way everywhere, and on cross-cultural affinities that may not add up to a clear-cut common denominator.

AXIAL "BREAKTHROUGHS" AND SEMANTIC "RELOCATIONS" IN ANCIENT EGYPT AND ISRAEL

JAN ASSMANN

1. *Introductory Remarks*

The theory of the Axial Age was formulated around the time of World War II, between 1935 and 1956. It was developed by three thinkers, the sociologist Alfred Weber, whose *Kultursoziologie* appeared in 1935, the philosopher Karl Jaspers, whose *Vom Ursprung und Ziel der Geschichte* followed in 1949, and the political philosopher Eric Voegelin, who started publishing his monumental *Order and History* in 1956. Although they never formed a school of thought, there is little doubt about their intellectual connection. Voegelin spent a year at Heidelberg (1929) and studied with Alfred Weber and Karl Jaspers. Further, we can also assume that both Jaspers and Voegelin were significantly influenced by Alfred Weber even though they didn't do much to acknowledge their debt to him.[1]

In all three accounts of the transition from a "pre-axial" to an "axial" age, the common element was the opposition between, on the one side, the "pre-axial" civilizations of the Ancient Near East, Egypt and Mesopotamia, and, on the other, the "axial" civilizations of Greece and Israel. This does not mean that reference to other civilizations was lacking. Weber and Jaspers extended the scope of their work to the Far East, by including India and China, while Voegelin devoted several chapters to Zoroastrianism and to China. However, as far as the "pre-axial" world was concerned, Egypt and Mesopotamia constituted its only representatives—and rightly so, given that these are the only civilizations where the written evidence

[1] In this respect, the meaning of the long and rather critical endnote, where Karl Jaspers discusses the points of connection and difference between Alfred Weber's approach and his own (Jaspers (1955) 265; n. 5), is not entirely clear.

reaches back until the beginning of the third millennium BCE. And yet, this very world was closed to Weber and Jaspers. Neither of them was able to reach a closer understanding of its cultural heritage. Voegelin was the first to study the ancient documents in a more in-depth way. Unable to read the texts in their original languages himself, he had nonetheless the good fortune to get into contact with leading Assyriologists and Egyptologists, most of them emigrants like him, who fled from Germany and other parts of Nazi-occupied Europe. After what must have been years of study of Assyriological and Egyptological literature, Voegelin was able to draw a convincing picture of the "pre-axial" world, for which he coined the term "cosmological". In the first part of the first volume of *Order and History*, titled "The Cosmological Order of the Ancient Near East", the first sentence reads:

> The societies of the ancient Near East were ordered in the form of the cosmological myth. By the time of Alexander, however, mankind had moved, through Israel, to existence in the presence under God and, through Hellas, to existence in love of the unseen measure of all being. And this movement beyond existence in an embracing cosmic order entailed a progress from the compact form of the myth to the differentiated forms of history and philosophy.[2]

Voegelin explains this decisive transformation in terms of a "break" from the "cosmological myth", or a "leap in being", leading, in Israel, into the openness of history "under God" (thus, history in the sense of *historia sacra*) and, in Greece, to philosophy and a form of existence "in love of the unseen measure of all being".

Unlike Weber and Jaspers, Voegelin was thus able to give a comparably clear description of the world which Israel and Greece had left behind. What in Weber's and Jaspers' accounts was nothing more than a pale counter-image of Europe, a mere "not-yet", in Voegelin's description, assumed a positive coloring as a world in its own right, a positive alternative to monotheism and philosophy. Nonetheless, being forced to use translations and to rely on secondary literature, Voegelin was unable to form an independent view of the cultural and intellectual development of the civilizations he was studying, and perceived them as rather monolithic blocks almost without any interior changes and evolutions; in short, without any history. To him,

[2] Voegelin (1956), 13.

these cultures "lived" from beginning to end within the frame of the "cosmological myth", while the breakthrough into a new world-view was solely the achievement of Israel and Greece. Despite three decades of intensive research and discussion, the restatement of the Axial Age theory by S. N. Eisenstadt[3] in the mid-eighties remains open to similar criticisms. As its critics argue, the theory places too much emphasis on the relatively uniform pattern of transformation, while the historical diversity of interpretative frameworks is not adequately addressed.

Of course, it is true that neither Mesopotamia nor Egypt invented philosophy or monotheism in the Greek and Jewish sense. It is also equally true that the relation between these "pre-axial", or "cosmological", societies and Israel and Greece can only be theorized in terms of revolutionary transformations. Yet, notwithstanding this general impression, in Egypt (but surely the same holds for Mesopotamia), several lesser "breakthroughs" seem to be pointing in the direction of the sort of transformation which would come to full fruition later in Israel and Greece. Seen in this broader perspective, the idea of the Axial Age loses much of its dramatic character. The revolutionary breakthroughs occurring between 800 and 200 BCE fall into line with similar, if lesser, steps in the intellectual history of the Ancient Near East. In this paper, my point of focus is Ancient Egypt and the changes that announced the "axial" transformations in Israel, rather than Greece. The first part looks at three such changes (that is, transformations within the intellectual and religious history of ancient Egypt, which led to considerable changes, though not to what could be called an "axial transformation"); while the second part deals with the "Mosaic distinction" and the "axial transformation" that took place in the slow transition from the "cosmological immanence" of the oriental civilizations to the transcendental monotheism of Israel.

Voegelin described this process of conceptual transformation as a "breakthrough" from "compactness" to "differentiation". Israel and Greece were able to recognize differences and to draw distinctions where the oriental societies used "compact" concepts, which blurred these differences in a systematic way. The Egyptian evidence confirms this approach, especially with regard to the distinction between

[3] See Eisenstadt (1986). Cf. Eisenstadt (1987); and (1992).

the political and the religious sphere, or what I have called elsewhere, "Herrschaft" and "Heil".[4] In particular, the specific axial transformation, which the Bible represents as the exodus (from Egypt) and the entrance into a new form of religious and political order, involves primarily the distinction between religion and politics and, as such, it must be reconstructed and interpreted in terms of political theology. At the same time, historical experiences in the political sphere, that is, breakdowns and disappointments of a rather traumatic character, may also be identified as the decisive factors in the emergence of the Egyptian forerunners of axiality. It is to them that I now turn.

2. *Antecedents of Axiality in Ancient Egypt*

2.1 *The Judgment of the Dead*

The first in this set of changes concerns the idea of a *general* judgment of the dead.[5] In the Old Kingdom (2800-2150 BCE), the judgment of the dead took place before a tribunal modeled on earthly courts, in that it would be in session only if there were a case to pursue. Of course, the deceased had to be prepared for any possible accusation, the more so as s/he had to reckon not only with human but also with dead and divine accusers. Yet, if there were no accusers, there would be no trial, and, thus, this tribunal was considered as one of the many dangers of the liminal state between this world and the next. That is to say, it was not yet thought as a necessary and inevitable threshold, or passage, between life and afterlife.

The idea that all the dead had to go through an assessment before entering the other world developed during the Middle Kingdom, at the beginning of the 2nd millennium BCE. It is clearly expressed in a wisdom text dating from that time:

> The court that judge the wretch,
> You know they are not lenient
> On the day of judging the miserable,
> In the hour of doing their task.
> It is painful when the accuser has knowledge.
>
> Do not trust in length of years.
> They view a lifetime in an hour!

[4] See Assmann (2000).
[5] For the history of this idea, see Griffiths (1991).

When a man remains over after death,
His deeds are set beside him as a sum.

Being yonder lasts forever.
A Fool is he who does what they reprove!
He who reaches them without having done wrong
Will exist there like a god,
free-striding like the lords of eternity! [6]

Here, we are clearly dealing with a tribunal where everybody is to present him/herself after death. In addition, and this is another decisive difference between the old and the new conception, here the accuser is a god, and a "knowing god" for that, who looks into the heart of the deceased, and forms his judgement on the basis of that knowledge. However, and this needs to be stressed, the role of this god is not what, in the Old Kingdom conception of the judgement of the dead, was the role of the "prosecuting" side. His role, rather, is one, which was formerly played by the king, society or posterity.

In the tombs of the Old Kingdom, biographical inscriptions begin to appear during the latter half of the 3rd millennium in which a tomb-owner addresses posterity and gives an account of his achievements. The following is an inscription from the fifth dynasty, that is, the 25th c BCE.

I have come from my town
I have descended from my nome,
I have done justice for its lord,
I have satisfied him with what he loves.
I spoke truly, I did right,
I spoke fairly, I repeated fairly,
I seized the right moment,
so as to stand well with people.
I judged between two so as to content them,
I rescued the weak from one stronger than he
As much as was in my power.
I gave bread to the hungry, clothes to the naked,
I brought the boatless to land,
I buried him who has no son,
I made a boat for him who lacked one.
I respected my father, I pleased my mother,
I raised their children.[7]

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[6] Instruction for Merikare P 53-57; see Quack (1992), 34f.
[7] K. Sethe (1933), 198f.; Assmann (1990), 100.

The apologetic tone of this inscription is unmistakable. The speaker addresses the tribunal of posterity, knowing that his afterlife depends on its verdict. As a well-known proverb of the time puts it, "the true monument of a man is his virtue; the evil character will be forgotten."[8] The immortality of the tomb-owner depends on the verdict of posterity, on the memory of future generations and their willingness to read the inscriptions and recall his personality. In other words, what guaranteed the immortality of the deceased was his inclusion in the continuity of a living social memory. The monumental tomb had a crucial function in this, according to Egyptian beliefs, in that it made possible the communication with future generations, who, when visiting the tomb hundreds and thousands of years after the death of its owner, would read the inscriptions, look at the scenes, and marvel at his virtue. The hope of the deceased was that they would be so taken in by the importance of his life that they would recite a prayer in his name.

The breakdown of the Old Kingdom in the last quarter of the third millennium, shattered the belief in the durability of monuments and the continuity of social memory. In this situation of anxiety and reorientation, the verdict of posterity was "divinized". It took the form of a judgment made by a divine court, the court of Osiris, before which every deceased was supposed to appear. The idea of such a general judgment of the dead, where the decision about the immortality or annihilation of the deceased, was relegated to a divine authority, could be interpreted as a breakthrough into a kind of transcendence.[9] Compared to this-worldly institutions (such as king, society and posterity) the divine tribunal has undoubtedly a transcendent, that-worldly character. However, I would not speak of "breakthroughs" and "transcendental visions" here but rather of "semantic relocations", whereby a complex of ideas, concepts, and values, is transferred from one sphere to another; in this case, from the socio-political sphere of social memory to the transcendent sphere of the divine.[10] The semantic relocation, here, was caused by a severe disappointment in the political sphere. In the Old Kingdom, people

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[8] *Stele* London UC 14333, ed. Goedicke (1962), 26; cf. W. Schenkel (1964), 11f.

[9] For this interpretation, cf. Assmann (1990), ch. 5.

[10] The German term is "Umbuchung", see Assmann, 2000, *passim*. The English word, "relocation", has been suggested by Johann Arnason.

would invest all their means into the erection of monumental tombs, which they considered absolute guarantees of immortality. By means of such a tomb, they hoped to continue their existence in the vicinity of their lord, the pharaoh, and in the memory of future generations. The breakdown of the Old Kingdom along with the disappearance of kingship and the pilloring and destruction of the tombs showed these hopes to be illusory. Longing for safer warrants of immortality, people turned elsewhere, beyond the social sphere. The "break-*down*" in the order of the political caused a "break-*through*" towards "meta-political" foundations of order.

2.2 *The Discovery of Inner Man*

The idea of the judgment of the dead by a divine court meant a break-through not only with respect to an outer but also to an inner transcendence, involving an important shift in what may be called "the history of the heart".[11]

The central symbolization in the judgment scene showed a scales with the heart of the deceased on one side and the symbol of truth and justice on the other. During the weighing of his/her heart, the deceased had to recite two long lists of possible crimes and violations blocking his/her immortality, and explicitly declare his/her innocence with respect to each. One list had to be recited before Osiris, the other before 42 judges. Every lie would make the scale with the heart sink a little deeper. In what follows, the deceased implores his heart not to betray him:

> O my heart which I had from my mother,
> o my heart which I had upon earth:
> do not rise up against me as a witness
> in the presence of the lord of things;
> do not speak against me concerning what I have done,
> do not bring up against me in the presence of the Great God, lord of the West.[12]

In a late papyrus, the deceased asks Atum for support:

> May you give me my mouth that I may speak with it,
> may you lead my heart for me in the moment of danger.
> May you create my mouth for me that I may speak with it

[11] Cf. Assmann (1993), 81-112.
[12] *Book of the Dead*, ch. 30, in the transl. by R.O. Faulkner (1985), 27.

in the presence of the Great God, lord of the Netherworld.[13]

What he fears is that every discrepancy between the speaking mouth—declaring his innocence—and the heart on the scales would make the heart sink every time a little deeper until it sinks beyond redemption and the tribunal denies him immortality.

The emergence of a general judgment of the dead puts, thus, quite a new emphasis on the notion of the heart, that is to say, on inner man as the center of moral responsibility, conscience and accountability. The biographical inscriptions reflect this discovery of inner man in a very clear way. As far as I can see, the word "heart" plays no role in the autobiographical inscriptions of the Old Kingdom.[14] What these texts show us is an official acting solely on the basis of royal orders. Planning, after all, is the prerogative of the king. It is on his initiative that each arm is set in motion. The inscriptions of the later part of the Old Kingdom, moreover, despite the fact that they dwell a lot on the achievements of their owners, also show that everything is done on royal orders. This is what David Riesman called

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[13] Pap.Louvre 3279, ed. J.C. Goyon (1966), 28.

[14] This statement requires several explanations and qualifications. By "autobiographies", I understand a genre of tomb inscriptions which developed during the early 4th dynasty (ca. 2600 BCE) from two different sources: (a) from the names and titles of the tomb-owner, which were expanded into a narrative of his career ("career biography"); and (b) from a commentary on the tomb and its sacrosanct nature, which were developed into declarations of the owner's moral integrity ("ideal biography"). The two genres of auto-thematization were kept apart during the Old Kingdom and merged only at the end of the Old Kingdom into the classical type of Egyptian autobiography. On this, see further Lichtheim (1988).

In the history of this genre, the notion of the "heart" appears only in the Middle Kingdom. This does not mean that it may not occur much earlier in other genres. The Pyramid Texts (the mortuary texts of the Old Kingdom), contain many references to the "heart", but these belong to the a-historical "deep structure" of the idea. Yet more important, in this respect, are two other sources: proper names and literary ("wisdom") texts. If the name *Hq3-jb* (that is, "ruler of (one's own) heart" or "(My) heart is (my) ruler"), which appears in the 6th dynasty, can be really said to express the notions of self-control and of "heart-directedness", then it has to be regarded as a precursor of ideas which become prominent in autobiographies only in the Middle Kingdom. The other "problem" case is a literary text, the "Teaching of Ptahhotep", a text pretending to be composed under king Asosi of dynasty V, where the idea of self-control (*hrp jb*: "submerging the heart") plays a great role. However, the question of whether this indication is to be taken literally or, rather, to be regarded as a literary fiction remains controversial. My reconstruction of the history of the heart in ancient Egypt rests upon the assumption that the *Teaching of Ptahhotep*, or at least the pertinent sections, belong to the Middle Kingdom.

"outward directedness",[15] which, in Old Kingdom Egypt, took the form of "king-directedness". The invention of the heart as a symbol of "inner directedness" and moral responsibility is the result of a long process, which started with the end of the Old Kingdom and led to a new configuration of personhood, anchored on the concept of the "heart-directed" man.[16] The most explicit elaboration of the "heart" in this way (that is, as the seat of inner qualities and the leading force of the person) appears on the *stela* of Antef, who lived under Thutmosis III, and who, in his "autobiography", seems to have followed closely the model of the Middle Kingdom:

> It was my heart that induced me to do this,
> according to its instruction for me.
> It is an excellent witness for me:
> I did not violate its injunctions.
> Because I feared to transgress its orders
> I prospered exceedingly well.
> I did very well because of its instructions concerning my way of action.
> I was free of reproach because of its guidance.
> (...) It is a divine utterance in every body,
> blessed be he whom it has conducted on the right way of action.[17]

In this configuration, the heart appears not only as an inner motor of will, initiative and self-determined activity, but also, and more importantly, as a moral instance, as an agency whose orders and instructions must not be "violated" and "transgressed". And yet, the voice of the heart is not that of a self-reliant individuality. It is the voice of social and moral responsibility, and, as such, of divine character. In this respect, the notion of the heart comes close to our notion of conscience (Gewissen). The heart, in short, is the organ through which individuals open up to the rules of togetherness, are bound to one another, and brought into the structures (and the strictures) of community.

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[15] Riesman (1950).

[16] Miriam Lichtheim, very aptly, interprets this process as a veritable "discovery of the self": The new attitudes of self-reliance and self-reflection are mirrored in a vocabulary which continued to grow as man discovered his "self" and began to formulate its manifestations (Lichtheim (1988), 142).

[17] Louvre C 26: K. Sethe (1961), 974f.; Assmann (1987), 225f.

2.3 *The Appearance of "Personal Piety"*

Both the emergence of a *general* judgment of the dead and the discovery of "inner man" can be interpreted as cases of "semantic relocation"—that is, as operations where a complex of values and concepts is being transferred from one cultural sphere to another; say, from the socio-political to the religious sphere. With the generalization of the judgment of the dead, what was once a decision made by society, the king, or posterity, concerning the worthiness of a deceased to continue his/her life beyond the threshold of death is now transferred to the sphere of the divine. Now, it is a divine tribunal and its president, Osiris, who decide upon the immortality of the deceased, while immortality as such is transferred from the "mundane" sphere of social memory to the "transcendental" sphere of the divine world. Becoming immortal no longer means living on in the memory of one's community, both present and future, but living on in a radically other sphere, beyond human reach, in the realm of Osiris.

A similar interpretation applies to the concept of the heart as the center of human action and responsibility. In the Old Kingdom it was the king who acted as the collective heart of the society. Every individual activity was thought to occur only by royal order. However, with the disappearance of this motivational center, god and the heart filled the gap. Indeed, we find some nobles claiming to have acted on divine orders, while others to have been motivated by their heart. From the Middle Kingdom onwards, the idea that the heart constitutes the inner center of human motivation becomes the dominant anthropological assumption. Now, it is the heart that leads a man to follow the king and to act on his orders. In this shift, we encounter, thus, another instance of "semantic relocation", whereby the concepts of initiative, motivation and responsibility are "transferred", or "relocated", from the "mundane" sphere of political obedience to the "transcendental" sphere of interiority, conscience and "personal" decision.

Now, the third in this set of changes, which announce the moment of axiality in Egypt, represents the most distinct case of such "relocation". It concerns the appearance of a religious trend, which Egyptologists call "personal piety",[18] where individuals form special

[18] See Assmann (1996), 259-277. The term "Persönliche Frömmigkeit" was

relationships with certain deities. In Egyptian, this is expressed in formulas such as "putting god N into one's heart" and "walking (or acting) on the water of god N", which we encounter in prayers and tomb inscriptions from the 15th century onwards. In a tomb inscription we read, for instance,

> God is father and mother for him *who takes him into his heart*,
> He turns away from him who neglects his city, (...)
> But he whom he leads will not loose his way.[19]

And in a prayer:

> *I gave you into my heart* because of your strength. [...]
> You are my protector. Behold: my fear has vanished.[20]

The following extract from a hymn to the crocodile god Sobek of Crocodilopolis, dating from the Ramesside period, provides us with one of the most representative instances of this trend

> I want to praise your beautiful face
> And to satisfy your Ka day by day,
> For I have placed myself on your water
> *And have filled my heart with you.*
>
> You are a god whom to invoke,
> With a friendly heart towards mankind.
> How rejoices *who has put you into his heart*!
> Woe to him who attacks you!
> For your wrath is so great,
> Your plans are so efficient,
> Your mercy is so swift.[21]

The language of these texts has a long history.[22] Many expressions can be traced back to the First Intermediate Period (2150-2000 BCE), where they describe the relation of patron and client. During the Middle Kingdom (2000-1750 BCE), the ruling dynasty adopted this relation, together with its rhetoric, to forge a new kind of rapport

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coined by Erman in 1910 and translated as "personal piety" by James Henry Breasted, who, in his magisterial and highly influential book *The Development of Religion and Thought in Ancient Egypt* (Breasted, [1912] 1972), identified this concept as the hallmark of a whole period of Egyptian history ("The Age of Personal Piety"), referring to the Ramesside Age (1300-1100 BCE).

[19] J. Assmann (1983), 228-30; 1999; my emphasis.

[20] Cairo CG 12217 recto ed. Posener (1975), 206f; my emphasis.

[21] Cube statue of Ramose, Herbin (1980), 187; doc. 189.

[22] For details, see Assmann (1979), 11-72.

between the king and his officials, wherein the actions of the latter would be directed by their "hearts" (that is, an inner core of "uncommanded" loyalty, motivation, virtue and responsibility). After the Amarna revolution, this attitude, which we call "loyalism", was transferred to the divine sphere and served to describe the relation between god and man more generally. Typical of the rhetoric of "loyalism" is the opposition of wrath and mercy, the formulae of heart and water, and especially the stylistic device called "macarism" or "beautitude" ("Happy the man who …", "blessed is the man who"), known to all of us as the beginning of the Book of Psalms. The rhetoric of "loyalism" had also an important revival in the Amarna age, and often sentences from that period read like the following:

> Blessed the man who puts you into his heart,
> For he will spend his old age in perfection.[23]

At this point, let me briefly explain a few things about the Amarna period, a period known as an age of religious revolution,[24] when Akhenaten replaced the countless traditional cults with the cult of the one and only Aten, the god of light and time. What was crucial in this move was not so much the replacement of the many by the One, but the terms in which this took place. That is to say, for Akhenaten, the fact that the totality of reality could be reduced to the workings of light and time made all the other deities appear as inert, superfluous, fictitious, and false, with nothing to contribute to the explanation of the world. Akhenaten was thus the first in the history of mankind to apply the distinction between true and false to religion—that is, the same distinction which later, in the form of biblical monotheism, led to a transformation of "axial" dimensions. At the same time, although Akhenaten radically changed traditional Egyptian cosmology, he did not break with it. His god, the sun, was a cosmic energy also, the source of light and time, without any personal and ethical traits. Further, and more importantly, his intervention left untouched the "compact" unity of religion and politics. In fact, it seems that Akhenaten did everything to cement this "undifferentiated" rapport between the two and counteract the beginnings of "personal piety", as if sensing its revolutionary potential.

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[23] Sandman *(1938),* 97.11-12.

[24] The most recent literature on Akhenaten is Hornung (2000); Montserrat (2000); and Reeves (2001).

Thus, in the new cosmological schema, Aten acted towards humanity as a cosmic energy, while Akhenaten appeared as a personal god to individuals and took the place of the object in the relationship of "personal piety":

> He shows his wrath against him who ignores his teachings
> And his favour to him who knows it.[25]

In this way, Akhenaten reinstalled the king as the sole mediator between god and man, where "personal piety" tended to form an immediate relationship between a deity and an individual, outside the official institutions of cult and temple. In this respect, the Amarna religion was clearly a restoration rather than an innovation.

Akhenaten failed in his project. Everything that he sought to suppress reappeared stronger than ever. After his death, the Egyptians not only returned to their traditional deities but the trend of "personal piety" developed into the dominant mentality and religious attitude of the time—so much so, in fact, that Breasted, at the beginning of this century, called this "the age of personal piety".[26] However, this was undoubtedly a new form of "personal piety", where God had the role which Akhenaten had in the Amarna Period, and before him the king in the Middle Kingdom, and before him the patron in the First Intermediate Period, acting as father and mother to all: father to orphans, husband to widows, refuge to the persecuted, protector to the poor, good shepherd, judge, pilot and steering oar, merciful to his followers, terrible to his enemies. And this was not all. In fact, what was radically new about this form of "personal piety" can be best analyzed in terms of a double "semantic relocation", where, on the one hand, the concepts and the rhetoric of "loyalism" were transferred from the political to the divine sphere and used as the model for the relationship of god and man more generally; while, on the other, protection was no longer sought on the "mundane" sphere, from king or patrons, but on the divine sphere, from a deity. Thus, sentences like the following come up frequently in prayers of this period:

> I have not sought for myself a protector among men,
> God N is my defender.[27]

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[25] Sandman (1938), 86.15-16.
[26] Breasted (1972), 344-370.
[27] See, e.g. Assmann, (1999), #173.12-13, 42ff., 62ff., 102ff.; 177, 5-11.

In the time of Ramses II, a man called Kiki, a follower of the goddess Mut, who donated all his property to her temple, wrote in his tomb "autobiography":

> He bethought himself
> That he should find a patron:
> And he found Mut at the head of the gods,
> Fate and fortune in her hand,
> Lifetime and breath of life are hers to command.
> (…) I have not chosen a protector among men,
> I have not sought myself a patron among the great.
> (…) My heart is filled with my mistress.
> I have no fear of anyone.
> I spend the night in quiet sleep,
> because I have a protector.[28]

The triggering factor for this kind of "relocation" seems obvious. It involves the political trauma of the Amarna revolution and the monstrous spectacle of a kingship turning sinful and criminal towards its own gods. Thus, the breakdown of a politics stressing the religious monopoly of the state, led, on the one hand, to the loss of this monopoly on the part of the state, and, on the other, to the proliferation of personal forms of religiosity.

Further, the upsurge and spread of "personal piety" meant a new chapter in the "history of the heart". The ideal of the "heart-directed man" of the Middle and early New Kingdoms now changed into the ideal of the "god-directed heart". In the tomb of the Vezir Pasiara from the time of Seti I (ca. 1300 BCE), a short invocation of Amun is put in the mouth of the sculptor:

> Amun the steering oar
> for him who puts him into his heart.[29]

This idea finds its most explicit, and as it were "classical" expression, in a famous passage in the teaching of Amenemope:

> Keep firm (*dns* "make heavy") your heart, steady your heart.
> Do not steer with your tongue.
> If a man's tongue is the boat's rudder,
> the Lord of All is yet its pilot.[30]

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[28] Mohammad (1960), 48ff.; Negm (1997); Wilson (1970), 187-92; Assmann (1999), Nr. 173

[29] Assmann, Hofmann, Kampp, Seyfried (forthcoming), Text 173.

[30] Amenemope XX.3-6: Lichtheim (1976), 158.

The ideas of the "leading heart" and the "heart-directed individual" are very different from the idea of the "god-directed heart" in that they belong to a different historical situation and respond to a different set of needs. On the one hand, the notion of the "heart-directed man" seems to be shaped by social needs. The virtues that go with it, responsibility, reliability, self-control, commitment and confidence, are social virtues. There is no other place on earth to establish Ma`at than in the heart of man. On the other hand, the idea of the "god-directed heart", seems to be shaped by individual needs: shelter from fear and anxiety, guidance in a pathless and unintelligible world, protection against persecution, human injustice, malign demons and deities, dangers of all sorts, including the Pharaoh.[31] Typical requests refer to the injustice of judges and to calumny (e.g. "may you rescue me from the mouth of men"[32]). It is not only man's *inner* world of passions, fears, drives and emotions that is considered unsteady, irrational, and subject to abrupt change, but also the *outer* world of society and nature:

> Do not say "Today is like tomorrow".
> How will this end?
> Comes tomorrow, today has vanished,
> the deep has become the water's edge.
> Crocodiles are bared, hippopotami stranded,
> the fish crowded together.
> Jackals are sated, birds are in feast,
> the fishnets have been drained.[33]

The world has become unintelligible, incalculable, unstable. It no longer inspires comfort and confidence. In such a context, where nothing but god provides some sense of relief and stability, god becomes the sole resting point in a swirling world. The texts of "personal piety" bespeak an unmistakable distrust in the "mundane sphere", which after all had proved so unreliable in the Amarna age. Those who yearned for some sort of fixity and stability would put their trust in god. We are very close, in the Ramesside period, to a kind of "axial transformation". However, for various reasons, which,

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[31] Morenz (1969), 113-125; Assmann (1976), 359-367.

[32] tBM 5656 (ÄHG Nr.190) in Assmann, 1999, 38-40; for other references, see p. 612. Cf. Job 5.21. Also the teaching of Amenemope promises to "save him (the disciple) from the mouth of strangers" (I.11), Lichtheim (1976), 148.

[33] Amenemope 6.18-7.4: Lichtheim (1976), 151.

although interesting to explore further, cannot be examined in the present context, the decisive axial breakthrough did not happen in Egypt but in Israel. Crucial in this, in my opinion, was the inability, or the unwillingness, of the Egyptians, to draw a clear line between the religious and the political. Despite the numerous and significant "relocations" that occurred after the breakdown of the Old Kingdom, pharaonic kingship, by mirroring in its rule the solar circuit (that is, allegedly the way in which the creator ruled the heavens), never gave up its claim to represent the divine sphere and to act on earth as a representative of the creator. The unity of heaven and earth, this strong relationship of analogy and representation, wherein the spheres of the "transcendental" and the "mundane" appeared as one, prevented Egypt from undergoing an axial transformation in the end.

3. *The "Mosaic Distinction" as an Axial Transformation*

By "Mosaic distinction" I mean the distinction between true and false in religion.[34] This distinction was alien to "primary religion",[35] which was based on distinctions such as pure and impure, sacred and profane, and its introduction was revolutionary in that it created a *new typ*e of religion. For the first time, and quite unlike "primary religion", a religion set itself off, not only against other religions including its own religious tradition, but also against other cultural spheres such as politics, law and the economy. At the same time, in addition to setting itself up as an autonomous cultural sphere in its own right, this new type of religion claimed for itself a superior form of authority and normativity *vis à vis* other spheres.

The radicality, therefore, of the "Mosaic distinction" between true and false, as opposed to the one made by Akhenaten, lies in its connection to the distinction between religion and politics, or "state" and "church". In Akhenaten's case, as we saw earlier, the distinction between true and false formed the basis for the abolition of the traditional religion of ancient Egypt but did not lead to a separation between the spheres of religion and politics. Kingship kept its

[34] See Assmann (1997), 1-8; and *passim.*

[35] For the distinction between "primary" and "secondary" religions, see Sundermeier (1987), 411-423; and Sundermeier (1999).

mediating role between god and man, and, even after the Amarna period, in the "age of personal piety"; what was broken was only its monopoly of that role. In Egypt, the state always acted as a kind of church, being, as it were, the only institutionalized instance of religion. Thus, the separation of politics and religion, "Herrschaft" and "Heil", the mundane and the transcendental, was exclusively the achievement of Israel; an achievement, which, in the biblical account, is connected with the name of Moses and with the legend of the exodus from Egypt.[36]

The political meaning of the "Mosaic distinction" becomes evident in the Exodus tradition. By leaving Egypt, Israel separates itself from a political system, which is denounced as false, oppressive, and humiliating. Seen from the view-point of the biblical texts and in the narrative enactment of the Exodus, monotheism appears both as a political movement of liberation from pharaonic oppression and as the foundation of an alternative way of life, where humans are no longer subject to human rule but freely consent to enter into an alliance with God and adopt the stipulations of divine law.[37] In this context, Egypt appears, as the symbol, not so much of "false religion" (i.e., paganism and idolatry), but, above all, of "false politics", as the "house of serfdom", and the significance of the Exodus lies in the double move, which, signals, on the one hand, leaving behind the "house of oppression" and, on the other, entering the realm of freedom. "Freedom", to be sure, is not a biblical word and does not occur in this context. It is obvious nonetheless, that the alliance, or "covenant", established with God at Mt Sinai is presented in the narrative as a liberation from the serfdom of human rule. Further, entering into an alliance with God and accepting His Law did not simply mean the founding of yet another state. Insofar as Egypt appears as the paradigmatic "state" representing both political and divine power and order, it also meant a radical break with the oriental principle of rulership and the establishment of a different kind of polity altogether, a polity, that is, where the principle of kingship

[36] As has been shown by Rodney Needham and Louis Dumont, a similar distinction underlies the Indian system of "dual sovereignty", which involves, on the one hand, a religious (Brahmin), and, on the other, a political (Kshatriya) authority. In fact, the duality of religious and military leadership seems rather widespread even among tribal societies and has little to do with what I describe as the political implications and consequences of the "Mosaic distinction".

[37] For details and bibliography, see Assmann (2000), 46-52.

was allowed only a minimal place.[38] It is precisely this anti-regal impulse, which in the narrative forms the basis of the resistance to pharaonic oppression. In addition, and this is another crucial point, in the same way that the people liberate themselves from political oppression, God also "emancipates" Himself from *political* representation. Religious salvation becomes thus the exclusive competence of God, who, now, for the first time, takes the initiative of historical action and withdraws the principle of salvation ("Heil") from *political* representation and "mundane" power.

The events in the story of the exodus from Egypt are located[39] at a time strangely close to Akhenaten and his monotheistic revolution (that is, sometime in the 14th or the 13th century BCE). The story, however, *was told* much later, betweeen the 7th and the 5th centuries, in Judah and Babylonia during a time which for the Israelites was marked by Assyrian oppression, Babylonian exile and Persian domination. In some respects, the "semantic relocation" it involves, from the mundane sphere of politics to the transcendental sphere of religion, can be compared to "personal piety" in Egypt, where, as we saw earlier, the semiology of loyalism was transferred from the political to the religious sphere. In the Exodus story, what we are dealing with is the transfer of the semiology of Assyrian foreign politics (vassal treaties) from the political to the religious sphere. It is also obvious that, in both cases, the relocations were occasioned by severe disappointments, crises, and traumatic experiences in the political sphere. The difference between them is that the relocation as effected in (and by) Israel had a much more radical character and led to completely different results than the one in Egypt. The use of the model of political alliance, as a new form of the relationship between god and man, meant the creation of a completely new form of religion, which proved able to withstand the pressures of political oppression. The biblical texts, especially in Deuteronomy, use the language of Assyrian loyalty oaths[40] and vassal treaties.[41] The

[38] For the theory of the weak state, see Malamat (1990), 65-77; and Handel (1981). For the concept of "counter-society" (or "Kontrastgesellschaft"), see Lohfink (1987a), 33-86, esp. at 44. A similar concept is put forward in Clastres (1974). Lohfink also applies the concept of "Kontrastgesellschaft" to early Israelite society, in Lohfink (1987b), 106-136, esp. 119ff.

[39] The events, that is, not in the historical sense of "what really happened", but in the narratological sense of related time.

[40] Otto (1999); and Steymans (1995).

[41] Baltzer (1964).

political theology of Assyria was thus adopted by way of a "subversive inversion" and transformed into the political theology of Israel.[42] Whereas the first stressed the inseparable unity of the divine and the political, the latter stressed the categorical separation of the two.

From now on, politics and religion, or "state" and "church", are different spheres whose relationship has to be laboriously negotiated and whose re-unification can only be achieved by force. Political theology turns into a critical discourse which, in the biblical tradition, is critical of government, and in the Greek tradition is critical of religion. The distinction between, and the separation of, religion and politics, or state and church, has to be regarded as one of the most important features of axiality. Subsequent attempts, therefore, at reuniting and "streamlining"[43] these two spheres, such as in the French tradition of the *"rois thaumaturges"*, or in totalitarian forms of civic religion,[44] are to be regarded as shifts towards de-axialization.

The anti-Egyptian, or, more generally, the anti-state character of biblical monotheism and its political theology finds its clearest expression in the prohibition of images. Idolatry means, in the first place, the legitimization of rulership in terms of divine representation. Political authority presents itself in its images, symbols and ceremonies as a representative of the Divine. From the viewpoint of the Bible, this is idolatry. From the Egyptian viewpoint, however, this was precisely what the state was there for.[45] The Egyptians believed the gods to be remote and hidden. In their world-view, the gods withdrew from earth and became invisible, and, as a substitute for their real presence, they instituted the kingdom on earth to re-present them in the form of kings, images and sacred animals. The most important task of political authority was thus to ensure divine presence in a condition of divine absence and to maintain the seamless unity of the relationship between man, society and the cosmos. Within this schema, the king acted as representative of the creator:

> Re has installed the king
> on the earth of the living
> for ever and ever,

[42] Otto, (2001), 59-76.
[43] A helpless attempt to translate the Nazi-German term "Gleichschaltung".
[44] See Voegelin (1993).
[45] For a more detailed treatment of this topic, see Assmann (1989), 55-88.

> administering justice to humans, satisfying the gods,
> creating true order and banishing disorder.
> The king gives divine offerings to the gods
> and mortuary offerings to the transfigured dead.[46]

The king thus depended on the god, whom he imitated and represented, and the god depended on the king for maintaining the order of creation on earth among the living. In other words, God had created the king "in his image", so to speak—and, in fact, "image of god" was one of the most usual epithets for the Egyptian kings.

Now, biblical political theology is the exact opposite. In this perspective, it is the very category of representation which shows the falseness of pharaonic politics and religion in its most obvious and abhorrent form (that is, as the sphere of kings, images and sacred animals). Thus, the prohibition of images means more than anything else that god must not be represented.[47] The presence of images contradicts the *real presence* of the divine in the world, an idea which is also at work in the very notion of a covenant with God, since the very possibility of such a covenant is a God who turns towards the world in a way that is both political and "living". Images are the medium of a "magical" representation of the absent divine, and, as such, imply or presuppose the idea of divine absence. A "living" God, however, hides or reveals Himself as He chooses and forbids any attempts to make Him present through magic. This is why the "living God" (*Elohim hayim*) must not be represented, and at the same time this is the political meaning of the prohibition of images. The Golden Calf was meant to replace Moses, the only form in which God allowed Himself to be represented. The Israelites, who believed Moses dead, wanted to replace the representative of God by another representation. The function of the Golden Calf was therefore clearly political. Rather than a cult figure, it constituted a political symbol of leadership, in the same way that Moses did when he led the people out of Egypt, and its destruction put an end to all attempts of political representation. Images were artificial gods, and, as such, "other" gods—that is to say, not inexistent gods, as the ones whose worship Akhenaten abolished. They were forbidden gods, given that,

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[46] See Assmann (1995), 19ff.

[47] On the prohibition of images see, for instance, Dohmen (1987); Mettinger (1995); Uehlinger (1998), 52-63; Berlejung (1998); Dick (1999), 1-54; Keel (2001), 244-281.

where an alliance is formed with *one* (over)lord, any other relationship with "other" lords (*elohim aherim*) is forbidden. Thus, the political meaning of monotheism in its early stage does not deny the existence of other gods. On the contrary, without the existence of other gods, the request to stay faithful to *the* Lord would be pointless.

The radical destruction of representation meant that the divine, or "transcendental", sphere became independent of political institutions. It was thus able to survive the Babylonian exile and the loss of sovereign statehood under the Persians, when the former kingdom of Judah became integrated into the Persian empire as a province within the satrapy of Transeuphratene. Religion became an autonomous sphere, constituting and consolidating a vantage-point from which all other cultural spheres, including the political one, could be transformed. Max Weber, in his "Zwischenbetrachtung", identified the tension between religion and other cultural spheres such as economy, politics, aesthetics, the erotic and the intellectual spheres, as characteristic of "Erlösungsreligionen" (religions of salvation or redemption).[48] Tension presupposes distinction and differentiation, and I think that the process of differentiation, especially concerning the religious and the political spheres, is a characteristic feature of axiality.

Voegelin reconstructed the process, which led from the "cosmological societies" of the Ancient Near East to the rise of new, metacosmic, or "transcendental", world-views in Israel and Greece, in terms of a shift from "compactness" to "differentiation". In this account, "compactness" would constitute the hallmark of myth and the totalizing tendency of mythical thinking,[49] while "differentiation" would appear as the hallmark of axiality. Axiality, however, should not be equated with either antiquity (a certain time-period around 500 BCE) or modernity, where the differentiation of autonomous spheres is seen (by Weber, Habermas and others) as the most characteristic feature.[50] Weber, along with all those who followed his lead,

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[48] Weber (1920), 536-573.

[49] See especially the work of Claude Lévi Strauss. Cf. Godelier (1973), 309-329; and Habermas (1981), 72-113.

[50] I would like to thank Johann Arnason who drew my attention to the problem of reconciling my concept of "distinction and differentiation" with Max Weber's theory of the separation of cultural spheres, closely related to Weber's concepts of occidental rationalization and modernization. I think it is important to distinguish

including Voegelin and Habermas, interpreted differentiation as a purely mental process and a form of rationalization. What I wanted to show in this paper, with regard to Ancient Egypt, is the close relationship between historical and intellectual processes. Distinctions and differentiations in the intellectual sphere were brought about, and forced upon, the human mind by catastrophic and traumatic experiences on the level of history. There is no doubt that the rise of monotheism in the ancient world had historical consequences.[51] Yet, the rise of monotheism may itself be seen as a consequence of historical changes. In this sense, I take the emergence of certain intellectual and religious concepts in Ancient Egypt (such as the emergence of a general judgment of the dead, the "heart-directed man" and "personal piety") to be, if not directly caused, at least occasioned, or, in some other way, related to, historical traumas such as the breakdown of the Old Kingdom and the Amarna revolution.

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between "axiality" and "modernity", especially if we take axiality as a non-evolutionary concept (the "axial" paradigm , that is; not the "axial age").

[51] See Stark (2001).

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MESOPOTAMIAN VISTAS ON AXIAL TRANSFORMATIONS

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Introduction

Those who are immersed in the study of Axial Age models of cultural interpretation are fully aware that the ideas they are working on are more than half a century old. But to someone who studies the civilizations of the ancient Near East, and ancient Mesopotamia in particular, it may come as somewhat of a surprise that such highly charged and pregnant ideas have had almost no resonance within our academic specialties. To be sure, four masters of all things Assyrian, A. L. Oppenheim (1975), Paul Garelli (1975), Hayim Tadmor (1986), and Peter Machinist (1986), did address the questions raised by the Axial Age theory during two major conferences in the 70s and 80s. Truth be told, though, their contributions, while cited, have not lead to any further elaboration of axial problematics within Assyriology. Yet if Assyriologists have rarely taken up the challenge, others have done so for them, and, for the most part, they have dismissed the cultures of Mesopotamia and Egypt as pre-axial civilizations that failed to make the historic leap. Moreover, even if it is sometimes acknowledged that Mesopotamia was borderline pre-axial, and more self-reflexive than has often been supposed,[1] the fact remains that the two great literate civilizations of the ancient Near East, Mesopotamia and Egypt, did not develop the types of transcendental visions that characterize certain other later cultures. Yet, when Eisenstadt says, for instance, that "this revolutionary process took place in several major civilizations including Ancient Israel, Ancient Greece, Early Christianity, Zoroastrian Iran, early Imperial China, and the Hindu and Buddhist civilizations"[2]—one sees

[1] Machinist (1986); and (2001).
[2] Eisenstadt (1986), 1.

that other important early cultures are conspicuously absent from this list.

In fact, the number of such "pre-axial" civilizations is actually larger than most historians would allow, for Mesopotamia and Egypt were not the only "high civilizations," if one may be permitted this term, of ancient Western Asia. If we leave aside the various Levantine and Anatolian states (including the Hittite Empire), that disintegrated in the cataclysmic events of the twelfth century BCE, we still have to take into consideration a broad range of cultures that existed at various times in Iran, India and their northern and eastern borders. Iran is particularly important for such broad, long-range historical study, as it was the locus of a number of powerful political formations and complex cultural structures over the millennia. One only needs to recall here, how, in the fourth millennium, various elements of proto-Elamite culture, including a writing system roughly contemporary with the earliest Mesopotamian and Egyptian examples, were present in the enormous area approximating the area where today we find the modern state of Iran. Later Elamite highland states often rivaled and took control of the smaller political units in Babylonia; even the famous Hammurabi, whose figure was so crucial to Voegelin's account of Mesopotamian civilization, acknowledged Elamite sovereignty at one point during his reign. We know something of the history of these Iranian regions mainly because of Mesopotamian writings and various archaeological findings. Writing in these areas was mostly used for accounting and for laconic and formulaic inscriptions, and as a result we have limited access to the kind of information that is important for the student of the Axial Age hypothesis. We are even less informed about the spiritual aspects of the Indus Valley civilization, which has left behind only very short messages, mostly on seals, that, so far, have resisted all attempts at decipherment.

Pre-Axial Civilizations

Although there are many protestations to the contrary, one has a sense that, for many historians, labels such as "pre-axial" represent the empty face of timeless, unchanging, conformist, and tradition-bound civilizations, that can be viewed as precursors or antecedents of more worthy cultures. This is certainly true of Jaspers' initial formulation of the hypothesis, and Jaspers is not the only one to rely

on this sort of sweeping generalization. Even a radical thinker such as Fukuyama reveals much when he states that the "Chinese Civilization, whether one looks at political organization, family life, or economic production, did not look terribly different in the Han dynasty than it did in the Sung or Ch'ing periods."[3] One could easily imagine any number of writers expressing similar sentiments about ancient Egypt or Mesopotamia. Nothing could be further from the truth.[4] What we so glibly call "Mesopotamian Civilization" is, in reality, a convenient conceptual *bricolage* of many different cultural features, spread out diachronically over millennia in generally the same geographical space. This long, extremely complex occupational sequence is full of political and cultural breaks, discontinuities, local variation, and with its own visionary as well as revivalist movements. The ideals of political unity, so pronounced in the official texts, often reflect the wishful thinking of narrow political elites in a land which for much of its history was ruled from multiple political centers. The mighty state of the overly honored Babylonian king Hammurabi was as short-lived as many earlier moments of Mesopotamian unity. As far as we know, in the thousands of documented years prior to his reign, most of southern Mesopotamia was ruled by one center for a century and a half under the Sargonic Dynasty, for eighty years or so by the Third Dynasty of Ur, and for less than half a century by Rim-Sin of Larsa, who was in turn deposed by Hammurabi. The large state that he controlled did not last long, and shrunk down to size a few decades later during his son's reign. As a result, their successors ruled a very different kingdom, which had lost almost all of its southern holdings and had to expand up the Euphrates into parts of Syria. In the north, in the area that would be later occupied by the state of Assyria, a ruler by the name of Shamshi-Addu, whose life overlapped with the early years of Hammurabi's reign in the south, managed to impose administrative uniformity and to solidify control over a large territorial state covering eastern Anatolia and most of Syria up to the Zagros moun-

[3] Fukuyama (1995), 32.

[4] To be fair, the quote from Fukuyama comes from a discussion on economic modernization and he is undoubtedly correct in his assertion that the *rate* of economic and civilizational development in Europe increased rapidly with the advent of new scientific and technological developments from the sixteenth century onwards and their global spread. Nevertheless, the relegation of earlier cultures to a static one-dimensional portrait is deeply troubling.

tains in the east. Shamshi-Addu had a relatively long reign of more than fifty years, but upon his death his state collapsed without a trace. Around 1595 BCE. Hittite raiders from far-off Anatolia ransacked Babylon and put and end to the dynasty. They did not stay, however, and city life seems to have returned to some form of normalcy, but no native dynasty took the place of the deposed royal lineage, and large-scale statehood was only gradually restored. The later political histories of Babylonia and Assyria are equally, if not more, complex, and the polities that followed often lasted no more than a few generations. Indeed, the fragility of ancient Near Eastern state-formations is often underestimated, and the historical issue is more about typology than structural continuity.

Much the same holds true for the development of the Mesopotamian cultural heritage. It is sometimes claimed that the written "great tradition" was the cultural glue that held it all together over the millennia, the conservative element that contributed much to the glance backwards, which is—or so it is claimed—so characteristic of Mesopotamian world views.[5] There can be no doubt that there was much continuity in "cuneiform culture," but it is also true that when one looks back at the more than three millennia of literacy in that part of the world, there appear many chasms and breaks in that tradition that counterbalance the sense of timeless repetition. Again and again the carriers of the written word sifted and restructured the received "canon," often discarding whole categories of texts and shifting the balance to completely new cultural schemes.[6]

Although few scholars—with the notable exception of Eric Voegelin—have investigated Karl Jaspers' hypothesis in detail, the reactions to this kind of world historical generalization have predictably varied from skepticism to full embrace. On one side of the spectrum, there are the prescient comments of Joseph Vogt, who, as early as 1961, thought that the picture of ancient Egypt and Babylon painted by Jaspers was much too schematic and did not correspond to what was then known about these cultures;[7] and of Fritz Schachermeyr, another ancient historian, who opined that there

[5] See, most recently, Yoffee (1993).
[6] See in general, Michalowski (2003b).
[7] Vogt, in Anderle (1964), 276.

was really no Axial Age, only a set of axial phenomena[8]—a provocative observation that seems to have gone unnoticed by other scholars, with the notable exception of anthropologist Eric Wolf.[9] On the other side of spectrum, there is Marshall Hodgson, the great Chicago scholar of Arabic history, who, following Jaspers, devised a scheme of world history that incorporated the notion of an Axial Age.[10] In this new vision of the world, history was divided into two great epochs: the Agrarian Age up to 1800 and the Technological Age that followed. The former was further subdivided into Pre-Axial (3000-800 BCE), Axial (800-200), and Post-Axial (200 BCE- 1800 CE) Ages.[11] Hodgson acknowledged that he had adopted this terminology from Jaspers, but his account was somewhat different from the original formulation, as he put more stress on the development of new "high cultures", expressed in vernacular languages, which formed new core areas. The details need not concern us here; what matters is that a world-history perspective has incorporated this type of thinking, for which the early civilizations of the Near East are but a prologue to later developments, albeit by a historian who was well aware of their complexities.[12]

Of course one could argue that such grand schemes of historical development have long been discarded into the dustbin of scholarship. Orderly notions of historical development, including those inspired by Western notions of "progress", have been counterbalanced by investigations that stress the chaotic, often unpredictable, nature of human achievements.[13] In turn, arguments for chaos rather than design as the explanatory frame of history have been counterbalanced by more specific cause-and-effect theories. If we accept that the sort of transformations, that have been viewed as "axial", took place in the face of, or in the aftermath of strong, sometimes even catastrophic disruptions in the political and organizational fabric of society, then various factors can be viewed as critical for historical

[8] Schachermeyr, in Anderle (1964), 282.

[9] Wolf (1967), 462.

[10] For a general exposition of his ideas, see Hodgson (1963); for a fully developed version, see the three volumes of *The Venture of Islam* (Hodgson, 1974). For an insightful discussion of Hodgson's intellectual background, see Burke (1979).

[11] Hodgson (1974), 113.

[12] Green (1995).

[13] For arguments for a chaotic theory of history, which also dismiss the Axial Age as mere coincidence, see Reisch (1991).

analysis. One such element, which is particularly important for the debate over changes at certain historical moments in various ancient Near Eastern polities, is climate change. More than two decades ago David Fischer wrote:

> In geological time, the axial age was approximately 2500 B.P., a moment which appears […] as a time of extreme and repeated climactic discontinuities—a period of extraordinary variability in the world's weather system. One might ask if there might have been a connection—not in a monistic way, but if Confucianism, Taoism, Buddhism, and Zoroastrianism were each in its own way a cultural response to social disorder caused in part by climactic disturbances.[14]

Fischer's remarks were made in the context of a polemic with writers who denied or minimized the possibility that climate could have any effect on world history. However, new information and new scientific methods have since added weight to his position. It is becoming increasingly clear that no matter how many other factors one must take into account, the cataclysmic events that disrupted much of Western Asia around 1200 BCE took place in the midst of major climactic changes that affected human societies in Europe, the Middle East and perhaps far beyond. This is the time when the Hittite empire as well as smaller states of the western Mediterranean littoral collapsed into oblivion, and the Sea Peoples raided as far as the Egyptian delta. Further east there is the dramatic decline in the fortunes of both Assyria and Babylonia. As Neumann and Parpola have demonstrated, using both modern scientific as well ancient textual data, the period between 1200 and 900 BCE was a time of climactic warming and concomitant aridity, resulting in lower river flows, lower crop yields, and less feed for grazing flocks.[15] By no means do I wish to argue that the development of new forms of wisdom, revelation, and doubt can be directly ascribed to such causes, but only to note that the social and political climates that nurtured such new ideas were produced by a variety of factors.

[14] Fischer (1980), 827.
[15] Neumann and Parpola (1987).

Early Formulations of the Hypothesis

Let us return, though, to what constitutes the most profound investigation of Mesopotamia within the axial framework: Eric Voegelin's four-volume *Order and History*, published in 1956. Peter Machinist has recently provided a succinct overview of the intellectual roots of Voegelin's work and, offering a fascinating critique of certain aspects of it, has re-evaluated Voegelin's claims in light of the current state of Assyriological knowledge.[16] Machinist demonstrates that the written remains from that culture offer proof of analytical conceptualizations characterized by categorization, abstraction, self-reflection and a concern for transcendence that far exceeds anything that Voegelin would have allowed. He also notes the rationalism that is evident in these works. Following Machinist's analysis, what I would like to discuss further here are two major elements of the axial hypothesis: rationalism and the idea of the compact cosmological myth.

As a defining feature of axial transformations, rationalism is generally thought to be lacking in earlier societies. Yet, which notion of rationalism is taken as lacking? In this connection, I think that it is more than useful to quote from Benjamin Schwartz's important essay on transcendence in ancient China, which appeared in the 1975 *Daedalus* issue on Axial Age civilizations:

> To the extent that the word "rationalism" refers to the primacy of the idea of order, we can already speak here of the emergence of a kind of Chinese rationalism. It is, however, a rationalism that is radically different from many varieties of rationalism in ancient Greece. What we have is the image of an all-embracing and inclusive order, which neither negates nor reduces to some ultimate principle that which is presumed to exist. Like the rationalism of bureaucracy, it classifies and subsumes the existent reality. It is a synthetic rather than an analytic conception of order.[17]

With a few minor changes, very much the same could be written about ancient Mesopotamia. Here, we also find the rational idea of an overarching order, which in this case, was embodied in the notion of "destiny," or "fate." This worked on different levels, for destinies could be cast, could be said to be unalterable, or could be inscribed;

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[16] Machinist (2001); see also his earlier (1998) discussions of these issues.
[17] Schwartz (1975), 59.

but aside from such local usage, there is clearly a distinct notion of a cosmic order that ruled the human as well as the divine world. In the political sphere, order was very much the domain of the king, who as the intermediary between human and divine was responsible for maintaining the proper balance in the earthly domain; this was particularly evident in Assyria, where the god Assur was the true sovereign.[18] In early Sumerian myths, this notion is partly embodied in the concept of the *me*, a difficult word that has been the subject of much speculation. Every being in the world had a *me*.[19] The Akkadian translations of the word make it clear that this concept was associated with proper ritual and ritual action, as the *me*'s were idealizations of the primeval rites associated with the being-in-the-world of cultural categories; in fact, the root of the word is the verb "to be." It may also very well be that this is a highly scholastic concept, associated on scribal lore with the long lists of words that constituted the basic units of cuneiform instruction. These rites were part of the timeless abstract order of the world, and in that sense they must be considered in concert with the Babylonian notion of *Šīmtu* (Sumerian *nam-tar*), usually rendered as "destiny", "fate", "fortune", "customary order", and even "death." The gods could cast a propitious or unpropitious "fate" for an individual or even for collectivities, but the written myths often hint at an order that was general, not explicitly defined, and transcended both the human and the divine worlds, maintaining a form of universal stasis over all. The metaphor of writing was sometimes used in this context, and this universal order was symbolized as a "tablet of destinies" (*tuppi Šīmāti*), which individual gods may hold and even manipulate, but, as the clay on this tablet was eternally dry, no one—human or divine—could erase or alter the cuneiform signs that determined the ways of the world. This primeval order defined and legitimated both the mundane and sacred spheres, but it also transcended them, neutralizing thus the tension between the two. The weak nature of this transcendence—and the synthetic nature of this concept of order—helps to explain the apparent lack of millenarian movements in Mesopotamian culture.

The second element of the axial hypothesis I want to consider

[18] Maul 1999.

[19] There are many conflicting interpretations of this concept. See, for example, Cavigneaux (1978).

further here, the notion of cosmological myth, requires some elaboration. First and foremost, it is necessary to stress the fluid nature of Mesopotamian written traditions about the gods and the cosmos. At different times and in different parts of the land, different gods were believed to rule the pantheon. Early on, for instance, the top position was in all probability occupied by Enki and his wife Ninhursanga, but by historical times his place was taken by Enlil at least as early as the middle or late part of the fourth millennium BCE. With the rise of Assyria in the middle of the second millennium, the god Assur—the "Assyrian Enlil"—ruled the world, while by the end of the millennium, in Babylonia, Marduk was elevated to a homologous position. None of these divine rulers personified a natural force or a quality. To the contrary, they represented distinctly abstract formulations. The first two were represented in mythology in distinctive ways, albeit both were primarily known as transgressive personalities, who went against cultural norms: Enki had committed incest, and Enlil rape. Assur, although syncretized with the old god Enlil, was rarely represented in mythology, and, more importantly, was not the active protagonist in any written story. For all practical purposes, it bears repeating that we know very little about *native* Assyrian myth and religion, as for the most part Assyrians copied Babylonian literary and scholastic texts and only rarely used their own dialect of Akkadian in such compositions. Nevertheless, Assur appears to us as a purely abstract deity, not embodied in any aspect of nature, one who ruled supreme with the perfunctory participation of other high deities. His elevated solitary status has even led some to suggest that in this manner the Assyrians came close to a form of monotheism.[20]

It is important to keep in mind that at no time in Mesopotamia was there a set of beliefs or a narrative that provided an exclusive, normative description of any aspect of cosmology or the structure of the universe. There can be no doubt that, for Voegelin, the central cosmic myth of the Babylonians was the long poem that the ancients called simply *Enūma Eliš*, "When on High…", after its opening words, and some moderns have misnamed as "The Babylonian Genesis." Yet, as Machinist also notes, the secondary

[20] Parpola (2002b). The figure of Assur still lacks a proper study; I have not yet had the opportunity to read Chamza (2002) on the subject.

literature used by Voegelin is now long out of date, and that we now generally date this composition to approximately 1100 BCE, and not to the time of Hammurabi, who ruled six hundred years earlier.

In the past *Enūma Eliš* has sometimes been presented as if it contained the sum of Mesopotamian beliefs about the origin and structure of the world. Voegelin certainly thought so, and wrote: "the epic is thus representative of Mesopotamian symbolism from the Sumerian to the Assyrian."[21] Indeed, the text has pretensions to such status, but that is all. The poetic depiction of first origins, the descent of generations of gods, the creation of humanity, the birth and rise to power of Marduk, chief deity of Babylon, his battles with and victory over the forces of disorder, and his building of Babylon as the axis that connects the center of the mundane world with the celestial spheres, all evidence a totalizing objective. This highly polemical, extremely scriptural work was intended to encompass and even obliterate all other myths, and to provide a charter for the supremacy of Babylonia over the entire inhabited world, especially over neighboring Assyria. The text was aimed at the intellectual elite, since it enjoined battle on the textual level, in strict combat with ancient literary texts that constituted the main mythological corpus of scribal lore—among them the Ninurta stories, the Poem of Atrahasis, as well as theological word lists. The final tablet, after the acclamation of Marduk as lord of the universe and of his city, Babylon, as its center, provides a recitation of the fifty names of the new divine master. The number fifty is here emblematic of his usurpation of the role of Enlil, the old king of the pantheon, whose symbol this was, and of the ancient Sumerian scribal tradition that was symbolized by his very persona. The names were all in Sumerian as well, and they were etymologized in a fanciful manner that also laid claim to ancient philological scribal lore in addition to written poetry and narrative, which, as *Enūma Eliš* proclaims, belonged to Babylonia as the carrier of all the intellectual legacy of the land.[22] The Assyrians, in their own way, answered this polemic weakly, occasionally replacing Marduk for Assur, but although the text was transmitted to later generations, widely copied, and even incorporated into the cult, there is no indication that this omnivorous grab at poetic, ideological, and

[21] Voegelin (2001), 81.

[22] For more on this interpretation of the text, see Michalowski (1990).

cosmological supremacy had been successful in any way.

At this point, I would like to stress once again the highly innovative political aspects of the poem, for this leads us to another axial matter: the apparent lack of polemic in early societies such as Mesopotamia. Oppenheim was explicit about this, and he clearly lamented the fact "that there is no arguing against opposing views; we find here none of the revealing dialogue, which in Greek life and thought finds expression in court, in the theater, and in the lecture room."[23] The poem described above counters this general claim, as does another polemical text, the Epic of Gilgamesh, but these compositions also demonstrate the limitations of intertextual polemic and debate. The crux of the matter lies in the limitations of Mesopotamian narrative, which had no room for any form of metatext, and very little room for literary narrative prose, leaving the writer with only poetics as a mode of expression.[24] The evidence deduced by Machinist for the existence of speculative thinking in ancient Mesopotamia demonstrates that the cuneiform tablets were only a small part of a broader intellectual universe—forever lost—in which oral explanation, commentary, and debate were as important as the texts themselves. We can only speculate about the nature of such oral intellectual activity, but certain clues may perhaps point us in the right direction. To give but one example, Erica Reiner has recently suggested that simple omens of the form "if …, then …" may in some cases have been tropes for longer and more complex parables. This, though, must remain, for now, only a hypothesis.[25]

Mesopotamian "Intellectuals"

It is often noted that both Karl Jaspers and Eric Voegelin were hamstrung by their inability to read Mesopotamian sources in the original languages. But it is also important to remember that they were children of their times, and that the general knowledge of this civilization has increased immensely since they wrote down their ideas. More recent formulations of the axial hypothesis also accentuate different aspects of the problem, concentrating more on socio-

[23] Oppenheim (1975), 38.
[24] Michalowski (1990).
[25] Reiner (1998).

political matters. No one has worked more on this than S. N. Eisenstatd. In the interests of brevity, I shall cite a recent formulation of his reinterpretation of axial transformations:[26]

> The central aspect of these revolutions was the emergence and institutionalization of the new ontological conceptions of a chasm between the transcendental and mundane orders … These conceptions, which first developed among a small group of autonomous, relatively unattached "intellectuals" (a new social element at the time), particularly among the carriers of models of cultural and social order, were ultimately transformed into the basic "hegemonic" premises of their respective civilizations, and were subsequently institutionalized.

For Eisenstadt, intellectuals were the key to the transformations that took place in the axial civilizations, prompting us to investigate further the role of the literate culture carriers in ancient Mesopotamia. This issue has already been addressed in discussions of the axial hypothesis, but some further comments may be useful in the context of the present debate.[27] It would be impossible, of course, to analyze the cultural role of the literati during the more than three millennia of Mesopotamian literate life. Following in the footsteps of Oppenheim and Tadmor, therefore, I will limit myself to the last few generations of intellectuals from Assyria and Babylonia, as this is a particularly well-documented period and one that is particularly relevant to the discussion. To provide proper focus, I begin with some general background information.

Almost all of our knowledge about late Assyrian scholarship comes from the archives unearthed in the capitol of Nineveh; these provide only glimpses of intellectual life in other parts of the realm, and we know from the royal library acquisition records that temples and individual scholars throughout Assyria and Babylonia collected tablets and were engaged in academic inquiry. The royal letters derive only from the reigns of Esarhaddon (680-669 BCE) and Assurbanipal (668-631 BCE), more precisely from the thirty-five years between 680-648 BCE, with some breaks in the record.[28] This is certainly only a small part of what was written in antiquity, since this is simply what had remained in Nineveh at the time of its destruction in 612 BCE, what had not been destroyed during the final pillage, and what was sub-

[26] Eisenstadt (1999), 4.
[27] Oppenheim (1975), Tadmor (1998).
[28] Parpola (1993), xxix.

sequently found and preserved during the imperfect excavations of the nineteenth century. It is easier to evaluate our knowledge of the literary texts of the library. To be sure, it is safe to assume that, as with the letters, not everything that was in the original collections was preserved, and that not everything that was found made it safely to London. To this day, the Nineveh collection of the British Museum has not been fully catalogued, but we have a fairly good idea of what it contains. The discovery of smaller late Assyrian collections or libraries of scholarly texts at such places as Sultantepe in Turkey, in the Nabu temple in Nimrud, or of an intact Persian period library in the temple of the sun-god in Sippar, provide controls, and it seems fairly certain that for the most part we can now evaluate the full range of the literary and scholarly cuneiform texts of the period. There remain large gaps however, which will remain unfilled forever. First, we know that among the 2500 or so tablets in the library—and this is a rough estimate—about 400 or so consisted of wooden writing boards covered with cuneiform writing incised in wax that have no chance of survival in the soil and climate of Iraq. This means that more than a sixth of the holdings of the libraries remains permanently out of our reach. Such writing boards were long in use in Assyria for various purposes and their existence, in the form of negative evidence, is only rarely taken into account.[29] Second, at least from the ninth century onwards, and most probably earlier as well, the vernacular language of Assyria was not Akkadian but Aramaic. Indeed, as Parpola writes:

> Men with Aramaic names are found in high state offices from the ninth century on, and by the eighth century, every official document was drawn up both in Akkadian and Aramaic. By the beginning of the seventh century the whole ruling class was certainly fully bilingual, for most of the administrative correspondence of the Empire was now carried out in Aramaic. Many scribes who wrote in cuneiform appear to have spoken Aramaic as their first language. For example, the scribe who wrote a beautiful copy of the first tablet of the Epic of Gilgamesh for the library of Assurbanipal, made a mistake which only a speaker of Aramaic could have made: he used the cuneiform sign for "lord" for writing the word "son," Aramaic *mara'* "lord" being homophonic with Akkadian *mara'* "son."[30]

[29] See, most recently, Frydank (2001).
[30] Parpola (2000a), 12.

Aramaic, though, was written on perishable materials that do not survive to our day, and thus this whole mass of administrative, epistolary, literary scrolls and wooden tablets is also gone forever. We have some knowledge of slightly later Aramaic literature concerning late Assyrian and Babylonian matters, but as yet we know next to nothing about the earlier history of literature in this language.[31]

There can be little doubt that major intellectual changes were taking place during the last centuries of the Assyrian empire. The complex, disruptive, and ultimately self-defeating policies of the last Assyrian kings shook up the fabric of society but also undoubtedly reverberated throughout the elites, both within the capital and beyond, in ways that are difficult to track in the surviving documentation. The founder of the dynasty, Sargon II (722-706 BCE), a usurper with a throne name that harkened back to the celebrated first ruler of the first Mesopotamian territorial state, built a new city, Dur-Sharrukin, for his residence. The amazing energy that went into this enterprise, however, was simply wasted, as it was never to be occupied. The gods had turned against the state, the king died in battle and these events precipitated an ideological crisis that would linger in Assyrian society for decades. We still cannot chart their consequences for the followers of various factions and the havoc caused among the elite families of the land. More importantly for the present discussion, the intellectual crisis instigated by the divine abandonment of Sargon created an atmosphere in which his sons relied more than ever on diviners to inform them of the will of the gods.[32] Yet, what exactly were the implications of this complex series of events? Did it affect the role of scholars at the court and the prestige and status of literacy in the state? The answers to such questions still escape us.

Although it is difficult to gauge the extent of literacy in different times and places, all indications are that the ability to read and write was necessary for membership in the bureaucratic elite in late Assyrian times, but it also seems highly probable that military and political officials did not have to master the art of writing to the same degree required of scribes and scholars. Indeed, bureaucrats as a rule used professional scribes for everyday accounting and official cor-

[31] Dalley (2001).
[32] On this whole affair see Tadmor, Landsberger, and Parpola (1989).

respondence, and got their fingers dirty with clay tablets only if absolutely necessary. There is a fine example of this in a letter sent by an official named Sin-na'di who had been appointed to an area east of the capital by king Sargon II; his missive reads in part: "I have no scribe (in the place) that my king sent me to. Let the king order the governor of Arrapha or (governor) Aššur-belu-taqqin to send me one."[33] The author had written this letter himself, or had it done by one of his less professional flunkies. As it was not done, though, in the hand, style, and register of the normal correspondence of the time, it demonstrates the kind of letter-writing that an official would resort to when a professional scribe was not available. This type of vernacular cuneiform literacy must also be contrasted with the much more complex and sophisticated skills required of the professional scribes who served the crown, the temples, and the well to do, and with the even more complex skills expected of the astronomers, omen specialists, and other learned men who spent their lives immersed in scholastic, ritual, and divinatory written lore.

These were the intellectuals of the time, or, as Tadmor prefers to call them, the literati.[34] Most of them were masters of the whole range of written traditions, but their expertise was centered on divining the messages that gods inscribed in the heavens. Hence, in Akkadian, they were referred to by the descriptive title *tupšar enūma anu enlil*, literally "scribe of the (tablet series) Enuma Anu Enlil," which we might render as "Master of Celestial Divination Literature."

The social parameters of this type of learning are difficult to ascertain. It does seem that in the first millennium this set of skills, learning, and wisdom were passed down from father to son, although the evidence for this is sparse, and there may have been avenues for social advancement though membership in the class. It is indicative of our ignorance about these matters that almost nothing is known about the origin, families, or training of the highest officials of the Assyrian court.[35] Some of them were eunuchs and thus could not hand down their offices to progeny.[36] In later times the literati were organized into lineages that harkened back to real or legendary scribes from hundreds of years past, and one has to assume that

[33] Parpola (1997), 318-319.
[34] Tadmor (1986), 208.
[35] Grayson (1999).
[36] Deller (1999).

this type of lineage was ascriptive rather than strictly genealogical. Specialists in various disciplines may also have worked in groups. One letter describes a *collegium* of twenty experts and this may have been typical of what one would find in various cities of the empire. Equally important is the matter of royal control over the lives of the scholars and over the textual tradition. Unfortunately, information pertinent to such issues is difficult to come by. Perhaps the best insight into royal control over the higher levels of scholarship may be gleaned from a unique epistle addressed to the Assyrian king Esarhaddon. The obverse reads:

> May (the gods) Assur, Shamash, Marduk, and Nabu bless the king, my lord!
> Parruṭu, a goldsmith of the queen's household, has bought a Babylonian and settled him in his own place just as the king and the crown prince. (The Babylonian) has taught his son exorcistic literature, and even explained extispicy omens to him, and he has even studied extract tablets of the (astronomical) series *Enūma Anu Enlil*, and all of this was right before the king, my lord!
> May the king, my lord, write to his servant about this matter…[37]

This extraordinary letter has no explicit author, and is most probably to be seen as a backbiting denunciation. One could, of course, question the motives and the veracity of the person who wrote this, but these are not matters for us to decide here. What is important is the tone, for it reveals that such things were not the prerogatives of mere goldsmiths, and, what is even more interesting, that they would be a matter of royal concern. Obliquely, it also informs us that the king had brought in one or more Babylonian teachers to instruct the crown prince, who in this case must be identified with Assurbanipal—the prince who, after ascending to the throne, would proclaim with great pride:

> I have mastered the craft of the sage Adapa, the guarded secret(s) of the whole scribal art. I can observe the signs of the heavens and the earth and discuss them in the meetings of the scholars, I am capable of debating with the learned oil omen masters the (chapter of the diviner manual entitled) "If the liver is a correspondence of the sky," and I can solve the most complicated mathematical divisions and multi-

[37] Parpola (1997), 312 n 18). The original copy (*ABL* 1245) does not do justice to the text and my translation is based on collations from the Royal Archives of Assyria Project kindly provided by Robert Whiting (now edited in Luukko and Van Buylaere [2002], no. 65).

> plications that have no solution (provided with the problem). I have read even the most complicated (bilingual) text whose Sumerian is obscure, and whose Akkadian version is difficult to unravel. I have studied inscribed stones from before the Flood of the complicated (text whose opening line is) *kakku sakku*.[38]

A closer look at the neo-Assyrian royal correspondence reveals that during the reigns of Esarhaddon (681-670 BCE) and his son Assurbanipal (669-627 BCE) the inner circle of scholars consisted of only seventeen experts, while a memorandum dating from the reign of Assurbanipal lists forty-five scholars in the royal palace at Nineveh.[39] Even if this is not the full story, it does reveal that the numbers of truly learned men were relatively small in Assyria at the time.

This leads us to the central issue in Eisenstadt's formulation of axial transformations: the role of independent intellectual groups characterized by heterodox tendencies. Certainly, it does seem that the Assyrian and Babylonian intellectuals of the court, as described here, were closely linked with the person of the king, were controlled by him, and hardly exhibit any signs of disagreement or revolt against the teachings of the times, or against the intellectual traditions they had inherited from their fathers. To be sure, we have evidence of interpretive and redactorial differences between individual scholars and between scribal centers, but this can hardly be invoked as evidence for true heterodox movements. In addition, we must keep in mind just how limited our information truly is. When Assurbanipal undertook to collect huge libraries in Nineveh, he managed to obtain tablets from individuals as well as from institutions such as temples. Such evidence indicates that, at the time, scholars throughout Babylonian and Assyria maintained impressive private tablet collections, but it does not tell us why this particular ruler decided to create such an extensive set of libraries in his capital.[40] Were his motivations simply practical, or was this an attempt to exert some kind of control, even if only symbolic, over the contemporary textual landscape? One could, of course, argue that literate specialists, who lived at some distance from the court, had been able to avoid

[38] See the discussion of this passage in Michalowski (2003a).

[39] Parpola (1993), xxv.

[40] On the process of accumulation of the libraries of Assurbanipal, see Parpola (1983).

the heavy hand of the center and develop secret heterodox traditions that left no traces in the preserved record. One cannot deny such possibilities, but there exists evidence that testifies to the close royal control over scholars throughout the realm. The prince Shamash-shum-ukin, who ruled Babylon, wrote a letter to his father, the Assyrian king Esarhaddon, in which he related the denunciation of a group of diviners who made observations concerning the king and the court, but never reported their findings to their sovereign.[41]

Any discussion of Axial Age transformations must take into account the socio-historical setting of the cultures that developed in this direction. Eric Wolf, one of the few cultural anthropologists to take note of the debate on axiality, was succinct about this matter, stating:

> It is, moreover, no accident that the great contradictions, which beset civilization, should appear with special strength and clarity in these regions, where more traditional and more loosely organized sets have not yet been subjected to the same degree of the centralizing and integrating tendencies of the center. Thus it is on the periphery, rather than in the civilization heartlands, that encounter the first stirrings of the new religions of salvation, the reactions of the alienated "proletariat" against the rulers: the Avesta on the border of nomad-settler interaction along the Oxos and Iaxartes, Buddhism in the small hill state of the stratified Sakya clan of Kapilavastu, Judeo-Christian messianism in the East Mediterranean shatter zone, Islam along the nomad-settler frontiers of Arabia.[42]

This observation requires further elaboration, but in the present context, what needs to be stressed is that the centers around which these margins clustered were the great multi-cultural Persian and Hellenistic civilizations. So far, the structural similarities, or shared principles, of axial movements have been the main focus of the discussion, but perhaps the broad social and political context in which these movements developed may prove to be more interesting in the long run. As others have observed, this was a time of much cultural contact and, in the areas around the Mediterranean basin at least, common ways of thinking were facilitated by, and grounded in, all-encompassing common spoken and written vernaculars: Aramaic and

[41] The letter was published in Parpola (1972); for his comments, see p. 31.
[42] Wolf (1967), 462.

Hellenistic Greek. To be sure, for centuries Babylonian had been the written *lingua franca* of the Near East, but never before had written languages been so close to the vernacular over such large areas. Seen from this point of view, what happened to Mesopotamia reveals more than just a lack of axial imagination. For Assyria, the brutal fact is that, around 612 BCE, the fabric of the state and most urban centers were completely destroyed, putting an end to any further possibilities, and while there are indications that some elements of the culture survived this catastrophe, it is virtually impossible to track down any intellectual developments in the centuries that followed. The last independent Mesopotamian state, ruled by the Neo-Babylonian state, lasted a mere 87 years more (625-539 BCE), just long enough to encompass the life-time of one woman, Adda-guppi', the mother of its last king, Nabonidus (555-539 BCE).

At that point, Babylonia became just another province of the Persian Empire, and was in turn encompassed by the Seleucid state. Although cuneiform literature continued to be copied and redacted, economic documents were still written in Babylonian, and Sumerian as well as Babylonian continued to be used in the temple rituals, all this took second place to Aramaic and Greek, not to mention other languages such as Elamite and Old Persian. It is often claimed that as a result, Mesopotamian culture withdrew into antiquarianism, reliving past intellectual glories, perpetuating and intensifying tendencies that had already been manifest under the Neo-Babylonian kings.[43] Indeed, these Neo-Babylonian kings were very much focused on the recovery of artifacts from the past, with a particular interest in inscribed objects and monuments; there might even have been a collection of such ancient treasures in Babylon.[44] Nonetheless, it can be argued that under Nabonidus the concern for past cultural glories was but one element in an effort to create a new Babylonian religious culture that incorporated elements found elsewhere, especially in Arabia and in the old Syrian center of the moon-god in Harran. After the loss of independence, the literati of Babylonia continued to collect, copy, and redact ancient Sumerian and Babylonian scholarly, literary, and religious texts, preserving the ancient traditions without any trace of Persian or Hellenistic influ-

[43] Goossens (1949), Beaulieu (1992, 1994), Bernbeck (1996).
[44] Klengel-Brandt (1990).

ence; in Uruk, we even know of two late private libraries of cuneiform texts. The leaders of the two revolts against the new Persian masters in 522 and 521 BCE appropriated the name of the Neo-Babylonian king Nebuchadnezzar who had died forty years earlier. The late temple archives of Uruk bear witness to major changes in the pantheon, including the elevation of relatively minor ancient deities whose names were taken from literary lists.[45] Things were very different in the ancient heartland of Assyria, which took some time to recover from the devastation of the seventh century. When conditions improved and the major urban centers began to recover under the Parthians and the Romans, elements of Assyrian religion appear to have survived or started re-surfacing.[46] Although the cult of Assur was so closely linked with the state and the crown that it probably had little relevance after the fall of the kingdom, it did not die out. The main temple in the city of Assur was rebuilt in the second century CE, suggesting that the new rulers still found it useful to appeal to local traditions for legitimization purposes. Of course, it may well be that the answer is much simpler, and that they, as well as their Persian, Seleucid, and Parthian predecessors in Babylonia, who commissioned cuneiform inscriptions and appealed to native traditions, were only acknowledging the prestige status of the old written languages.

But is antiquarianism the right word for the description of such phenomena? Nabonidus used the past to create new traditions that only seemingly revived antiquity, while the new cults in Uruk were hardly recreations of older customs. It is customary to view all of this intellectual activity in late first millennium Babylonia as the stale produce of small groups of traditionally oriented scribes, who stubbornly held on to a dead and outdated culture, while surrounded by a sea of Hellenism. Yet if we take the socio-political context of all this seriously, we also need to consider just how differently cuneiform culture functioned within the multiethnic Persian or Seleucid empires, where it was no longer an integral part of the establishment, but in all probability had acquired the role of a fundamentalist heterodox movement. Mesopotamia was no longer the center. It was now in some sense part of the periphery, culturally

[45] Beaulieu (1994).
[46] Dalley (1993), Parpola (1992), and Joannès (2000), 166-167.

speaking at least. As Eric Wolf stressed, in the passage quoted earlier, it was on the outskirts, rather than in the civilization heartlands, that the new axial religions arose, responding to organizational changes and cognitive imbalances in the centers. For Wolf, this was another reason for arguing in favor of axial phenomena rather than for an Axial Age. What I am suggesting here is that these fundamentalist-like reactions of Babylonian intellectuals should be seen as a specific type of heterodox movement. As such, they could perhaps serve as an example of a specific types of axial phenomenona that should also be taken into account in any discussion of this period of world history. I am by no means claiming that one can detect in this any traces of the kind of messianic movements and institutionalized utopian visions that are usually associated with contemporaneous and subsequent axial civilizations. These facts do suggest, however, that specific groups of intellectuals created—perhaps, recreated, is here a better word—a self-conscious collective subculture that resisted the axial institutionalizations that were taking shape all around them.[47] One may view this as a form of counter-axiality that was, ironically, both sociologically and structurally, homologous to the nascent axial movements in other societies.

Babylonian and Assyrian culture had a life well outside the geographical and temporal spans of the Mesopotamian civilizational heartland. One such place was Harran, the ancient cult center of the moon-god located in what is now southeastern Turkey, not far from the important religious center of Edessa (Urfa).[48] The cult of the moon-god of Harran was already documented in the early second millennium and the veneration of this deity is known to have spread over a wide area, including much of the Levant. It was obviously of great importance to the Assyrians. Both Esarhaddon and Assurbanipal were crowned there, and the latter appointed his brother as its governor, and rebuilt the ancient cult center. After the fall of the Assyrian capital of Nineveh in 612 BCE, the last king of Assyria fled there and tried to hold on to power; three years later, he was defeated at Harran by the Babylonians. Nabonidus, who in turn was the last independent Babylonian king, rebuilt the temple

[47] On such broader conceptualizations of axiality and on the issue of "axial phases", see the recent discussion provided by Giesen (1998), 49.

[48] Green (1992).

of the moon-god and elevated the god's cult within the context of a complex reworking of Mesopotamian politics and religion. Nabonidus, an usurper who in all likelihood had been fully educated in the cuneiform arts, insisted on his own readings of astronomical texts and his own interpretations of the textual tradition, and while the full scope of his attempted reforms is extremely difficult to gauge, there can be no doubt that he had in mind radical changes of the Mesopotamian tradition. These changes came to naught when the Persian armies ended his eighteen-year reign in 539 BCE.[49] Nabonidus, a figure somewhat analogous to his predecessor Assurbanipal, represents a specific kind of heterodoxy that is positioned at the center of power rather than on its margins or in opposition to it.

The last Babylonian king—maligned in the Book of Daniel under the name Nebuchadnezzar—disappeared from history, but his ideas, as well as those of his intellectual predecessors, in all likelihood lived on in Harran, which continued as a notorious religious center for centuries, until the Mongols destroyed it in the thirteenth century of the Common Era. Harran was famous in the Roman, Christian and Muslim worlds for its pagan as well as schismatic cults, and for the maintenance of cults that clearly harkened back to Babylonian and Assyrian times.

I invoke here the heterodox religious communities of Harran because of their Mesopotamian associations. In this connection, they merely serve as a reminder that most discussions of the Axial Age concentrate only on broader institutionalized religious movements—primarily monotheistic—that had long-term consequences leading up to modernity. The period that this "age" is deemed to cover was teeming with heterodox, often millenarian movements, some of which were only briefly institutionalized, others never. To speak only of Greece, Judaism, Christianity, and Zoroaster in the West without considering the Gnostics, the followers of Mani, the Mandeans, or Sabbeans, and so many others, serves to predetermine and limit any understanding of axiality. The broadening of the palate, including more exploration of ancient Egyptian and Mesopotamian thought, will undoubtedly lead to further reformulations of the basic axial hypothesis, incorporating societies that did not necessarily make the same kind of "breakthroughs", to use traditional terminology, but

[49] See, for the time being, Michalowski (2003a) with earlier literature. I am preparing a more detailed exploration of these issues.

developed many similar conceptualizations of world order. The focus on axial phenomena and their clustering, rather than on specific Axial Ages, may perhaps offer a better heuristic method for the comparative study of civilizations, one that does not make such strong cuts between privileged and unprivileged movements and societies, and therefore allows for a more nuanced exploration of human thought.

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ZOROASTRIAN ORIGINS: INDIAN AND IRANIAN CONNECTIONS

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The origins of Zoroastrianism remain a thorny subject in scholarly discussion. The date and place of the oldest Zoroastrian scriptures as well as the contents of the faith are as uncertain today as they were more than a century ago. It would serve no purpose to give an exhaustive survey of the theories and solutions offered; the bibliography of studies relating to these questions is too long for a brief summary within a relatively short chapter.[1]

Within the past few decades the pendulum has swung violently from one extreme to the other. In recent scholarship, the main proponent of positioning Zoroaster in the relatively late period, which accords with the "traditional" date, the sixth century BCE, has been W.B. Henning.[2] He was followed by Ilya Gershevitch.[3] Among the most important proponents of the opposite view, that Zoroaster (or, at any rate, the author or authors of the Gathas) lived in a much earlier era, possibly at the beginning of the first millennium BCE or even some centuries earlier, have been Mary Boyce,[4] on the one hand, and, with a different point of view, Helmut Humbach and Jean Kellens[5] on the other. The most dramatic manifestation of this pendulum-like alternation of opinions is the case of Gherardo Gnoli, a prominent and highly regarded scholar. He was initially a forceful advocate of an early dating of Zoroaster. More recently he has adopted the recent dating and argued eloquently for its validity.[6]

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[1] For a useful survey cf. Gnoli (1980), 159ff. A collection of articles touching on this and other themes is in Schlerath (1970).

[2] Henning (1951).

[3] Gershevitch (1995).

[4] Boyce (1975); Boyce (1992).

[5] Humbach (1991); Kellens (1991); Kellens (2000).

[6] The early dating is endorsed in Gnoli (1980); Gnoli (1985); the later dating is favoured by Gnoli (1995); Gnoli (2000).

Establishing the time and the place of Zoroaster would be relevant to Zoroastrianism's significance within the framework of an Axial Age theory, but it would be wrong to start the discussion with the possible convenience of the dating of Zoroaster in connection with a theory which itself requires substantiation. A discussion of the relevance of the dating of Zoroaster to Axial Age theorizing can only take place after the dating is established independently, within the perspective of Iranian history and philology. Axial Age theorists should, for their part, patiently await the outcome of the internal debate concerning the sense and structure of the message of the Gathas, the oldest group of Avestan hymns which are attributed by the tradition to Zoroaster himself, the founder of the religion. This debate has now lasted more than a century and a half, and is not likely to be resolved overnight, certainly not on the basis of the available data. Without establishing a consensus on these issues there is little point in theorizing about the broader issues of world history in which Axial Age theorists are engaged.

The immediate task of historians of Zoroastrianism is to argue for what each believes is the most likely reconstruction of the sequence of history between the chronological points which represent the poles of scholarly consensus. The earlier is represented by the ancient Indo-Iranian culture, the hypothetical common ground from which the later Indian civilization on the one hand and the Iranian religion on the other developed their two separate identities. This is dependent on the assumption that they developed from a common heritage. The later pole is represented by the fully-developed form of Sasanian Zoroastrianism, operating in the full glare of history several centuries later, from the third century CE onwards. I have not mentioned the Achaemenian and the Parthian dynasties, over whose religious affiliation there is no scholarly consensus, but which, to my mind, are definitely part of the history of Zoroastrianism (although the definition of this term should not be too rigidly applied). Nor have I touched upon the status of what is known as the Younger Avesta, the Avestan texts such as the Yashts and the Vendidad, which belong to a linguistic layer more recent than that of the Gathas.

At this stage of our documentation, the emergence of a compelling piece of evidence that would enable us definitively to close the debate is unlikely. It is rather a case of arranging the various elements of the puzzle in such a way as to create as likely, as harmonious or as satisfactory a picture as possible, one which would least

militate against the known facts of history and literature. The chances are that certain points will always remain beyond the bounds of the reconstruction offered, and that some questions will remain unresolved. We attempt to mend a blanket using material which is far too fragmented to deck the entire area of our historical ignorance. This area operates like a black hole: it tends to implode any scaffolding we may try to erect. The scholar is on precarious ground and in danger of losing balance.

Although the prospects of offering a universally accepted new theory of Zoroaster's date and message are not bright, one feels a responsibility to take a stand on the main issues surrounding this problem. If the figure of the founder of Zoroastrianism and his basic ideas are allowed to remain as nebulous as they are at the moment, one may lose much of the sense of Zoroastrianism as it developed in the course of history. Zoroastrianism, as a historical presence, is based on a body of scripture that serves as its guiding force and provides it with a point of departure. Much will always remain undefinable in the earliest Zoroastrian scriptures, but it is important to realize that the later tradition was built upon a textual foundation, and that one of our aims should be to see the line which runs from those origins to the fully developed tradition.

The main points of the debate about the date of Zoroaster are easily summarized. A date for Zoroaster recorded by the tenth-century Arabic-language author al-Biruni seemed to be precise and free from symbolic or mythological significance: 258 years before Alexander.[7] If this date is accepted, all we need do is determine the point in the life or career of Zoroaster to which this date refers, as well as what point in the chronology of Alexander the Great or of his heirs is involved in the calculation. There are a few permutations which answer each one of these questions, but the results do not differ among them by more than a few decades in the seventh and sixth centuries BCE. There remains, however, one disturbing question regarding this date: it implies a system of time-reckoning stretching over a very long period—more than two and half centuries—one which for some unexplained reason is supposed to have stopped with Alexander. We know however of no system of chro-

[7] A full discussion of the various dates given in the sources can be found in Gnoli's publications, esp. Gnoli (1980); Gnoli (1985), and in Humbach (1991), I, pp. 24ff.

nological reckoning in ancient Iran which goes beyond the life of a reigning king. The earliest long-stretch dating system used in Iran is the Seleucid era, borrowed from the Hellenistic world. This was followed many centuries later by the Era of Yazdegerd, which commemorates the collapse of the Sasanian Empire and of Zoroastrian sovereignty, and which is still in use among Zoroastrians. The source of the date "258 years before Alexander" represents no doubt the outcome of calculations derived from a body of literature which combines mythology and historiography. The result is as questionable as the data contained in the literary sources, which naturally include a great deal of material of non-historical character.

Several scholars have indeed argued that the traditional chronology of Zoroaster may have been established not by counting the years from Zoroaster to Alexander, but by speculation on the basis of assumptions which render the traditional dating of Zoroaster very doubtful.[8] Be that as it may, once the sixth-century BCE date is questioned, the traditional dating of Zoroaster is no longer a fact that one has to grapple with and against which one needs to muster strong evidence. On the contrary, those who believe in a sixth-century date must now prove the plausibility of their dating. Just as those who uphold any other date, they must produce substantiation weighty enough to bolster their chronology for Zoroaster's activity.[9] The dates given in the Greek and Arabic sources, or those that can be derived from them, have all been shown with great probability to reflect late reconstructions, as opposed to solid primary data. In the absence of new evidence, there is no way of establishing a firm date; any date adopted is hypothetical.

It is in this situation that we find ourselves at the present moment. The various dates proposed between, say, 600 and some time before 1200 BCE[10] are all based on sets of considerations within the realm of historical possibility. Some of the arguments are based upon the period of time it might have taken for the proto-Indo-Iranian language to develop into Old Iranian or, more concretely, Old

[8] Two independent explanations of this kind based on two different sets of assumptions were offered by Shahbazi (1977) and Kingsley (1990).

[9] Gnoli (2000) has tried to do that without gaining the complete conviction of all scholars. Cf. also Shabazi (2002); Kellens (2001); Kellens (2002).

[10] The earliest dating is the one favoured by Boyce (1982), 3.

Avestan on the one hand, and Old Persian on the other; and, on the other side of the Iran-India border, the period which might have elapsed before Old Indian could have emerged from the proto-Indo-Iranian mother language. Such calculations, it must be said bluntly, can lead to almost any result. The point of separation of the Indian and Iranian tribes is not fixed; and the rate of change of any given language allows for wide latitude. There are thus too many subjective elements in this chronological estimate.

We also lack firm data on the social, political and historical situation in Eastern Iran at the beginning of the first millennium BCE. This is widely believed to be the general area where Zoroastrianism had its origins.[11] The history of the region during that period is shrouded in such darkness that even if we had a precise date for the birth of Zoroaster it might not be very meaningful for us. Chronology, in historical terms, acquires its meaning from the context into which it is set and from relative data. When an event can be correlated with other data, both elements in this equation gain some significance. A single fact in a blank area is practically devoid of meaning. An absolute dating of Zoroaster's life in a period and place for which no historical background is known can provide little insight into the question of who he was and the significance of his work at that time.

We do have, however, some comparative literary and religious data for the Gathas, the oldest part of the Zoroastrian scriptures. In terms of synchronicity the Gathas can be compared to the Vedic literature. In diachronic terms, they can be compared with the later portions of the Avesta and to the later Zoroastrian literature. While these data are not helpful in the establishment of absolute dating, they are certainly meaningful in terms of relative cultural chronology. Although they do not allow us to date the life and work of Zoroaster, they make it possible to talk about his faith and the literary expression of his religion against the background of the two parameters, the Vedic religion on the one hand, as a rough synchronic comparison; and the reconstructed continuity from Indo-

[11] The geographical data in the Avesta are not free from ambiguities. The only certainty that exists is that they do not refer to Western Iran, nor do they contain any awareness of the Achaemenian Empire. For an analysis of these data cf. Gnoli (1980) as well as Gnoli (1985), 15-30, who refers to the earlier studies of this theme, in particular Markwart (1938).

Iranian beginnings to the later Zoroastrian religion, on the other, as an element in diachronic comparison. None of these comparanda should be left out of consideration. None, I believe, should be given primacy in the treatment of Zoroaster's message over the other. In the following I shall try to explain what I mean with this statement.

In terms of dating, neither of the two comparisons is particularly reliable. The Rigvedic literature is not firmly datable; it is often assumed to belong to the twelfth century BCE or earlier, but it has been itself subject to much debate and speculation. The Gathic texts are close to the Rigveda in language and style, but quite remote from it in spirit. There is no good reason to believe that they must be the exact contemporaries of the Rigveda; they may indeed be substantially younger than the Rigveda.[12]

Can one assign absolute dating to the Gathas on the basis of our present state of knowledge? I very much doubt it. The Gathas are most likely earlier than the traditional sixth-century BCE date, but it is difficult to establish by how much. If the Vedic culture is placed somewhere in the second half of the second millennium BCE, it would make sense to place the Gathas some time later, perhaps in the ninth or eighth century BCE. It also makes good historical sense to assume that the origins of the religion of Ahura Mazda, which I believe are the same as the origins of Zoroastrianism, come some time before the establishment of the Achaemenid kingdom. We may recall that Ahura Mazda is celebrated as the great god who grants the Kingdom to Darius and his successors, and is the patron god of the Achaemenians. At least by the time of Darius, Ahura Mazda (hence, I believe, some form of Zoroastrianism) is a well-recognized high deity of an old-established cult. The constant evocation of Ahura Mazda by the Achaemenian kings is designed to give them the kind of respectability and legitimacy which only a deity venerated by the population at large can grant.

The fact that the name of Zoroaster is not mentioned in the Achaemenian inscriptions may be interpreted in different ways. If we assume, as I do, that the religion of the Achaemenians was a form of Zoroastrianism, this silence is best interpreted on the assumption

[12] Kellens (2000), 46, says: "It is hardly an exaggeration to say the Old Avesta is the eleventh *mandala* of the Rigveda, only written in a different dialect". This statement, however, as Kellens himself anticipated in his formulation, is greatly exaggerated.

that this was an old-established religion whose founder was taken for granted and was of no immediate concern. To the Achaemenians, Zoroaster appears to have been a figure of considerable antiquity. The analogy of Moses, who is ignored in ancient Hebrew epigraphy (scanty though it is), may be relevant.

In terms of the culture of the community in which the author or authors of the Gathas functioned, it has been observed that there is no indication of urban culture or any sign of an elaborate system of government in the Gathic texts. The Gathas seem to breathe an air of tribal, partly nomadic, partly agricultural, society. While this is not helpful for precise dating, it further strengthens the feeling that we are removed, both in time and in space, from the centres of civilized life that existed in Western Iran some time before the advent of the Achaemenians.

These are considerations which would favour a date posterior to the presumed period of the Rigveda, but preceding the establishment of the Persian kingdom of the Achaemenians. A date around the eighth or ninth century BCE seems to fulfil this requirement. Trying to be more specific would place us in the realm of pure speculation.

One of the most unfortunate phenomena in recent scholarship on the Gathas seems to me to be an excessive reliance on the linguistic data of the Rigveda. This is the credit of a modern scholarly group whose pedigree goes back to the late Karl Hoffmann of Erlangen. Its main proponents today are Helmut Humbach,[13] Johanna Narten[14] and more particularly Jean Kellens, the last partly in collaboration with Éric Pirart.[15] The work of this group of scholars has contributed enormously to the recent progress in the grammatical understanding of the Gathas, more particularly in the fields of morphology and syntax. I believe, however, that this tendency is likely to lead to a distortion of the contents and message of the Gathas.[16]

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[13] Cf. mostly Humbach (1959); Humbach (1991).

[14] Chiefly Narten (1986); Narten (1996).

[15] Cf. the convenient collection of articles in English translation, Kellens (2000), and the edition, translation and commentary on the Gathas, Kellens and Pirart (1988-1991).

[16] I should stress however that I am in sympathy with much that is said by Humbach and Narten. Many of the insights of Kellens deserve of course serious consideration.

There is of course nothing wrong with employing the comparative material of the early Indian scriptures, which are very close in language and terminology to the older Avesta. On the contrary, it is extremely important to do so. It is, however, erroneous to endow this type of comparison with an exclusive validity which relegates all other approaches to a position of irrelevancy. The rich and varied linguistic Iranian data tend to be completely disregarded in the eyes of those who uphold the Vedicizing approach to the Gathas. Another peculiarity of the Vedicizing school is that, while it pretends to take into account the linguistic aspects alone, it has a clear religious bias which colours its interpretation of the Gathas. Adherents of this school of investigation take as their point of departure the assumption that the Gathas are not only linguistically close to the Vedas, but that they also display the same essential type of religious attitude as the Vedas. If the Vedas are usually taken to be exclusively ritual texts, with no interest in any other aspect of religious behaviour or faith, the Gathas should be based on the same premises. Here the use of a similar vocabulary is accepted as sufficient proof that we are confronted with the same type of attitude.

These presumptions are not self-evident. They are contrary to common sense and common historical experience. In countless cases in the history of religions we come across the phenomenon that new religious expressions use the language of their predecessors while instilling into it new meaning. This is done sometimes out of a desire to continue the old tradition while consciously or unconsciously departing from it; as often as not this is done simply because the language of tradition is the only one available. Subtle semantic changes creep into the language as new religious ideas emerge. Such procedures are, in fact, the rule in the history of religions rather than the exception. Some prominent examples from the religions of the Near East are the various stages in the development of Judaism, which never abandoned its religious terminology, while the contents of its message underwent substantial changes. To some extent this is true also of the early Christian writings with regard to Judaism, although there the opposite position, that of frequent polemics, obscures the fact that much less had changed than is being suggested. Manichaeism provides another case, and Islam still another instance of the continuous use of the terminology of the preceding civilizations while the contents had undergone significant modifications.

We should be careful not to confuse words with meanings. If a

given expression in the Gathas is similar to a word found in the Vedas, it is possible that it possesses the same meaning as the Vedic expression, but this is not always necessarily the case. If an expression is found to have a markedly different meaning in the later Zoroastrians exegesis, we should try and determine whether this is a misunderstanding of the original meaning of the Gathas. The alternative possibility, which should be given careful consideration, is that the word in question had already undergone a semantic transformation, so that the meaning in the later tradition can be assumed to have already been in force among the authors of the Gathic community. We should not arrogantly assume that our understanding of the Gathas, with the comparative linguistic tools at our disposal, is inherently superior to the living tradition of Zoroastrianism.

Cases of what looks like misunderstandings of the Gathas are not always as they appear. In many instances they are probably a way of reinterpreting the Gathas in the light of the later tradition. Not every effort at reinterpretation is valid for reconstructing the original message of the Gathas. But such traditional efforts should not be used to prove the contention that the later Zoroastrians had no idea of the significance of the message of the Gathas.[17] One may take it as a working hypothesis that later Zoroastrian tradition read the Gathas as a text into which one could insinuate by interpretation diverse elements of the theology as it developed in the course of centuries of study and liturgical recitation. At the same time it may be assumed that certain core ideas of the original teachings of the Gathas were still present in the late Sasanian and early Islamic schools of Zoroastrianism. A sharp distinction between the two is unlikely and unnecessary for our reconstruction of the history of the Zoroastrian religion. On the whole, Bartholomae's method[18] of always quoting the Zoroastrian interpretation and according it full consideration is certainly sound. The opposite position, that of treating with scorn anyone who takes into account the traditional interpretation of the ancient scriptures[19] shows to my mind a regrettable lack of sensitivity to historical processes and may lead us to lose a

[17] Some comments in this sense were made in Shaked (1996).

[18] Bartholomae (1904).

[19] As done by Kellens (2000), 3, where the author distances himself from any use of the traditional understanding of the texts.

potentially fruitful source of information concerning the text of the Gathas.

Some examples for cases in which an independent study of the Gathas, one that disregards the tradition, may cause us to misunderstand the message of the text may be quoted. The use of the term *manyu-* in the Gathas is a pertinent point. This is a notion of a mental or intellectual faculty present in man, but it is used in the texts also as a notion of a cosmic and perhaps ontological order, as it functions later on in the Pahlavi sources. This position is however uncomfortable to Kellens, who devoted a special article to the examination of this term. In it he concluded that the term in the Gathas signifies a (subjective) mental judgement, which may be rendered in English by "opinion", or by the French term *avis*.[20] It is not very likely that the subjective sense of the term possessed such a great prominence in the ritualistic context of the Gathas. The traditional interpretation of the term, as denoting an independent entity, has on the whole more merit. Another example is the treatment of the term for "kingship, dominion", Gathic *xšaθra-*. This term is interpreted by Kellens and Pirart not simply as "power, might", but as "pouvoir, emprise *rituelle*",[21] on the assumption that the ancient Iranians had no other thought on their mind except that of ritual, or, indeed, that their mind was totally and exclusively focused on ritual.

Zoroastrianism was, and remains to the present day, a religion that sets much store by ritual and legal practice. At the same time it has always held quite firmly to a whole range of beliefs, and, what is of no less importance, to an attitude of devotion and piety which in some of its manifestations can be described as mystical, with an esoteric tendency.[22] Its mysticism is sometimes coloured by shamanistic elements, based as it often is on the human potential to experience visions of the invisible world, on the human capacity to travel to regions beyond material existence.[23] The flexibility and versatility of Zoroastrianism as a religious culture is shown by the fact that it gave rise to groups which criticized the established hierarchy of the clergy,[24] but also to groups, such as the Mazdakites in the late

[20] Kellens (1990). Cf. Shaked (2002).
[21] Kellens and Pirart (1988-1991), II, p. 232.
[22] Shaked (1969).
[23] Shaked (1994), 27-51.
[24] E.g., Denkard VI, D2-D3, in Shaked (1979), 176-181, where two stories of

Sasanian period,[25] who developed, as it seems, their own type of mystical devotion. Zoroastrianism had the power to tolerate variant forms of the myth of creation such as the one associated with the figure and role of the god of time, Zurvan, in the story of the origins of the world.[26] Its potential productivity is witnessed by the influence that it exercised on Judaism and through it on Christianity; by its probable impact on the origins of gnosticism; by the fact that it gave rise to the western cult of Mithraism and by the direct influence that it exercised on the origins of Manichaeism.[27] This is just a partial list of the significant effects, direct or indirect, of Zoroastrianism. The original message of Zoroaster thus gave a tremendous impetus to a wide variety of religious expressions.

Let me try and summarize what seem to me the most conspicuous points in the message of Zoroaster, over which I believe there should not be much dispute (although, as we have seen, it is considerable).

It seems evident that the author of the Gathas, probably Zarathustra,[28] was a dualist in the sense that he tended to regard the world and man as a playground in which the conflict between two antagonistic impulses, mind entities, *manyu*s, take place. This does not stand in contradiction to his view of Ahura Mazda as a supreme deity, indeed as the only deity in the full sense of the term. Dualism and monotheism, as I have tried to show,[29] should not be taken to be labels for two religious systems that stand in contradiction to each

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ērbads (priests) are recounted, which contain explicit criticism of the life of luxury and pursuit of material benefits of the high priests at the royal court.

[25] Shaked (1994), 124-131.

[26] Shaked (1992).

[27] I would not go so far as to declare that Manichaeism is a development of Zoroastrianism in the same way as Christianity is a descendant of Judaism, as is done by Gnoli (1985), 74-76, following Bausani. Manichaeism can perhaps more accurately be characterized as a gnostic adaptation of Zoroastrianism.

[28] Some of the Vedicizing Iranists tend to doubt the existence of Zarathustra and in any case his authorship of the Gathas. I find this kind of argument unfruitful. If the Zoroastrian tradition puts a certain Zarathustra at the origins of the religion, and given the fact that we have little evidence for the precise date and historical background of primitive Zoroastrianism, there seems little point to questioning the existence of a religious founder called Zarathustra. One recalls the pointless arguments over the existence of Moses, Jesus or, in recent scholarship, of Muhammad. Martin Schwartz, in several articles (1986; 1991; forthcoming), has tried to show not only that Zoroaster existed, but that he deliberately and thoughtfully left his mark on his composition, the Gathic hymns.

[29] Shaked (1994), 8, 25. This is also the position of Gnoli (1985), 50.

other. Every monotheism is to some extent a dualism, at least insofar as it cannot escape facing the dilemma of the origin of evil. Placing evil in a world created by a single God implies a clash between God and his antagonist, whatever the degree of autonomy which the latter is given. Every dualism, on the other hand, is implicitly a monotheism, in so far as it recognizes only one of the two powers as a deity in the full sense of the term, while the other power is defined not as a deity but as a negative entity on a lower ontological level, as an Adversary, Opponent, Destructive Spirit, Lie, or the like.

Ahura Mazda, to my mind, is typical of the religious group represented by the Gathas. There have been attempts to show the existence of the name of Ahura Mazda outside Iran, sometimes in order to prove that Ahura Mazda preceded Zoroastrianism.[30] I feel, however, that this is not an established fact. In the absence of firm proof to the contrary, I believe that it is methodically sound to assume that Zoroastrianism is the only religion to recognize Ahura Mazda as the supreme god.[31] Zoroastrianism, however, may not have been identical in all its practices and tenets to the religion that is known to us from the Sasanian and post-Sasanian period. Even in that late period, as has been amply shown, Zoroastrianism served as a loose term for a wide range of beliefs and practices.

Qualifying the author of the Gathas as a dualist and at the same time also as a monotheist does not exclude the notion that he believed in a variety of benevolent entities which govern the world alongside Ahura Mazda, and who may be entitled to worship as part of the divine retinue. Their existence does not impinge on the uniqueness of Ahura Mazda. The main entities are not yet systematized in the Gathas as a group of six or seven, and indeed there are other entities of a similar status in the Gathas, which were ultimately left out of the restricted number of six or seven foremost divine entities. The entities, that were eventually given the collective title of Ameša Spenta, "the Bountiful Immortals", are not yet accorded a special place in the Gathic worship, as far as we can tell, but their existence and significance lies beyond doubt. In the Gathas their number is still open and their function is fluid.[32]

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[30] Cf., among others, Mayrhofer (1994). For the view of the pre-Zoroastrian existence of Ahura Mazda cf. Boyce (1975), 48-49; (1982), 3.

[31] Gnoli (1985), 49, and Narten (1996), 84, hold a similar view.

[32] The best recent study of these entities is by Narten (1982).

A question of considerable complexity is the position of the *daeva*s in the Avestan literature. They are treated as negative concepts, but the symmetrical negative relationship which was considered to be typical of the Avestan attitude to them, as contrasted with the way they are treated in the Indian Rigveda, is now known to be more subtle.[33] The character of the *daeva*s as negative entities is not consistently present in the Avesta, with several instances of deviations from the system as it has been reconstructed.[34]

There is clear indication in the Gathas, I believe, of the notions of creation and eschatology. The notion of eschatology comprises in all probability both a conception of the end of the world, namely one of universal eschatology, and one which deals with individual judgement and reward to each person after death. Eschatology is alluded to in the Gathas in terms of the beneficent effects of the ritual when it is properly carried out. The texts of the Gathas are particularly ambiguous on eschatological topics. It is not made decisively clear whether the Gathic poet has in mind a conception of eschatology that places it in the distant future, or one which is based on the immediate good effect of the ritual. As a typical example for this ambiguity one may quote a short phrase from Yasna 28:11. The text reads: *yāiš āŋhuš pouruyō bauuaṭ*. Humbach[35] translates: "(These eulogies) through which the primal existence came into being". In the commentary he remarks[36] that it is possible to emend the final verb to read *buuaṭ* (subjunctive), and then to translate: "the prime existence will come into being". In the latter case we may have either an immediate future, which is dependent on the ritual effect; or an eschatological, distant future. Kellens and Pirart opt for reading the verb in the subjunctive, without considering other possibilities, and interpret the future in a ritual sense. To their way of thinking no other type of future is conceivable in the Gathas. Eschatology is thus excluded from the outset. The plain reading of the text must however leave the question of the time in which the reward of the ritual action takes place open, whether it be in this life and in this world, or in a posthumous existence beyond this world. The eschatological

[33] This is due to a large extent to the studies of Kellens, especially Kellens (1994b).

[34] I hope to further discuss this problem elsewhere.

[35] Humbach (1991), vol. 1, 119.

[36] Humbach (1991), vol. 2, 29.

dimension is potentially there, and may well be postulated as part of the thinking in the Gathas.

I tried to present a set of tenets which are, to my mind, definitely present in the Gathas. The fact that they are also attested in Iran in the post-Gathic period should not make them suspect. There is no contradiction in principle between a religion with faith in a cluster of abstract notions which have the status of divine and beneficent entities, and one which holds a strong, almost obsessive, interest in ritual. The precise nature of the ritual is never given any expression in the texts. It is absurd to imagine the ancient Iranian religion as purely philosophical, with no interest in ritual—this has sometimes been the tendency of well-meaning interpreters of Zoroastrianism in the past. But it is just as unrealistic to think of ancient Zoroastrianism as consisting of nothing but ritual.[37]

What can we say of the essence of Zoroaster's religious message? We have a vague notion of the type of religion which may have been held by the Indo-Iranians before the two groups parted to go their own ways. We may accept that the Iranians held the early type of religion until Zoroaster came with a new revelation, in which he attacked false deities and false worship. It seems reasonable to assume that the Rigvedic religion is more conservative in terms of fidelity to the ancient Indo-Iranian heritage than the Gathas, because the structure of the Rigvedic religion is closer to that of the Greek and Roman religions than is the structure of the Gathic religion. The Gathas, which deviate from this pattern, display a kind of religion which is more personal, less collective. Although they seem to set great store by the correct performance of the ritual, they also carry elements of a new faith which is emerging: belief in the overall power of Ahura Mazda; the notion that this great deity is assisted by a host of divine beings associated with him and representing abstract notions (just as he himself is a representation of wisdom); a tendency towards a dichotomy of powers representing good and evil, truth and lie; a linear view of the history of the cosmos and of man, leading from the beginnings to a final point, with a notion of creation and one of divine reward and retribution; and, perhaps most importantly, faith in the inner affinity of God and Man. The latter relates the divine world and humanity through the fact that they share

[37] It must however be remarked that Kellens has a more sophisticated presentation of a ritual religion in Herrenschmidt and Kellens (1998), 49ff.

a set of qualities symbolized by the abstract notions which are accorded divine status. Among these notions Wisdom, Good Thought, Truth, Power, Right Thinking (i.e. piety and devotion), Wholeness and Immortality may be singled out, but there are also several others which were omitted from the list of the Ameša Spenta, the Bountiful Immortals, but which are nevertheless of great importance.[38]

Despite the stress on ritual (more implied than clearly expressed), the Gathic religion seems to put the main weight of religion on the choice or distinction made by man, following a primordial choice or decision made by the superhuman entities. The choice is expressed, of course, through the ritual, but also, no doubt, through faith and pious behaviour. It seems possible to say that the main contrast between the Gathic and the Vedic religion consists in the Gathic expectation that each individual should make the right choice or the right distinction, while the Vedic religion, at least in the earlier portions of the Rigveda, regards the communal performance of ritual and sacrifice as the highest religious achievement.

In evolutionary terms, as risky as this term may be, especially for cultural phenomena, the Gathic religion seems to present a more reflective, more inward-oriented kind of religion than the Rigveda. A similar inward-looking attitude to sacrifice and ritual in general will come in India at a somewhat later stage. Its earliest, hesitant, manifestation is in the tenth book of the Rigveda, and it is given full expression in the Upanishads. While the language of the Gathas strikes us as particularly close to that of the Rigveda, the type of religiosity of the Gathas reflects a stage closer to that followed later by both cultures, India and Iran. In both civilizations the line of change led them to transfer the main weight of the religious effort from ritual and material gains to inner concentration and reflection, from worship of personal deities to that of internal powers. The Gathas took in this direction a step for which the first nine books of the Rigveda were not yet ready when they were composed. At the same time, neither in India nor in Iran was ritual entirely abandoned or even relegated to a secondary position at any stage.

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[38] Narten (1996), 69-73, shows how the Gathas make ample use, in establishing this set of abstractions, of a tendency which already existed in the Indo-Iranian period and for which there is some evidence in the Rigveda. This tendency became the most characteristic aspect of the Zoroastrian religion.

The next phase in the chronology of Zoroastrianism is represented by the later texts of the Avesta, the Yashts and the Vendidad, which concentrate much more on mythology and the details of ritual. As most of the sacred scriptures ultimately assembled under the title of Avesta are lost, we are unable to tell whether what is left is a fair sample of the original canon of scriptures. There is enough evidence, in fact, to assert the opposite. A whole body of lost Avestan literature, of which we have summaries or commentaries in Pahlavi, the Zoroastrian language of the Sasanian period, seems to have been dedicated to the issues of cosmogony and eschatology, as well as to reflection on philosophical and theological issues and to legal matters, to the legends of Zoroaster and of other significant figures from the Iranian past, and probably to many other questions.

In the Sasanian period we find expressions of fully evolved and rigidly expressed dualism as well as subtle philosophical speculations using a complex technical vocabulary. The Sasanian literature also contained a transmission of the ancient mythology with possibly more recent elaborations and embellishments. In terms of the religious organization, we find in the Sasanian period a fairly elaborate priestly hierarchy under the protection and surveillance of the royal court, and at the same time a whole range of dissenting groups. These were rarely formally organized as sects; more often they seem to have operated like schools or study circles, or simply as loosely connected individuals with a preference for one version or another of the cosmogonic myths in circulation. It is in this way, I believe, that the myth of Zurvan was propagated, alongside the several other versions of the myth of creation. Manichaeism—a Zoroastrian heresy in its chameleon-like mode of operation—functioned as an alternative church organization in the realm, and in its ups and downs caused considerable and justified alarm to the priestly establishment and to the court. Mazdakism, a term which denotes more than one religious group, must have had a similar character.

From the Achaemenian period onwards, that is to say from the beginning of proper history in Iran, Zoroastrianism presents the aspect of an old-established religion. Already in the Achaemenian period Zoroaster seems to have been regarded as a figure of great antiquity. The different stages in the subsequent religious history of Iran do not display a clear line of development and cannot be said to possess a well-defined teleology. This is hardly surprising. A great religious tradition tends to develop in several parallel directions, all

of which usually continue the main elements of the early revelation, and none of which can necessarily be called a deviation from the basic cluster of notions inherited from the ancient scriptures. This common background gives them a certain coherence and some form of homogeneity.

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AXIAL TRANSFORMATIONS WITHIN ANCIENT ISRAELITE PRIESTHOOD

ISRAEL KNOHL

The rise of the prophets during the eighth century BCE is commonly referred to as the Axial Age transformation of ancient Israel. In this article I would like to point to axial transformations occurring in another circle, that of the priesthood.[1] These transformations also took place during the eighth century and they were connected to those of the prophets acting in the same era. The central figure among the prophets of this period was Isaiah the son of Amoz. Isaiah lived in Jerusalem, the center of priestly activity. Thus, it is natural to look for connection between the priestly circle and the prophets. I will focus my discussion on the transformation of two terms or conceptions, Torah and Holiness, as well as the issue of access to the holy.

A. *Torah*

The prophet Jeremiah says:

> The priests never asked themselves 'Where is the Lord?' the holders of the Torah ignored me.
> (Jeremiah 2:8).

The holders of the Torah are the priests[2] who hold and guard the scrolls of the Torah.

The concept of Torah in the priestly literature is very pragmatic. "Torah" is the word used to describe a set of teachings or laws

[1] It was S. N. Eisenstadt who has pointed out that both prophets and priests were "a new type of elite which was cited as the carrier of models of cultural and social order" see Eisenstadt (1986), 4.

[2] See Bright (1965), 15.

governing a certain situation and pertaining to ritual.[3] Each set of laws was probably written on an individual scroll. The scrolls had superscriptions or colophons indicating their contents.[4] Thus we find verses like: "This is the rule (*torah*) of the burnt offering" and "This is the rule (*torah*) of the leprosy" (Leviticus 6:2, 13:59).[5] It seems that these scrolls were kept within the priestly circle and their contents were not known outside of this circle.[6] The priests specialized in problems of Temple ritual and thus all matters of sacrifice, purity and impurity were reserved for them; an outsider would have no comprehension of such matters. In the book of Haggai, who prophesied in the early part of the Return unto Zion, it is written: "Seek a ruling (*torah*) from the priests" (Haggai 2:11).[7] Any person, who wanted to investigate a matter pertaining to purity and impurity, should go and ask a priest.

The priestly Torah was not known to the people and the priests were far from the popular religion.[8] This situation engendered estrangement and mutual ignorance. No one was familiar with the entire corpus. This, in turn, led to the creation of different customs, different laws and different norms in many realms of social and religious life.

Following the destruction of the Temple and the exile (586 BCE), it appears to have become necessary to gather the varied traditions and laws in a single book. This process culminated, after many years, in the formation of the Bible, the Book of Books, being the collected works of the people of Israel.

The first stage in the formation of the Bible was the editing of the Torah, the five books of Moses.[9] The editing consisted of gathering the different stories which were current among the people, and told of the creation of the world, the Patriarchs, the exodus from Egypt, and the events in the desert. In the same manner, the editors col-

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[3] See Begrich (1936), 63-88.

[4] See Fishbane (1980), 438-49.

[5] Cf. Leviticus 6:7, 18; 7:1, 11, 37; 11:46; 12:7; 14:2, 32, 54-7; 15:32-3; Numbers 5:29-30; 6:21.

[6] See Dillmann (1886), 666-67; Begrich, above no. 3; Ginsberg (1967), 23; Weinfeld (1969), 118, 122-23; Haran (1985), 11, 143; Cohen (1969), 39-44.

[7] Cf. Fishbane (1985), 135-6; Japheth (1988), p. 101.

[8] See Knohl (1995), 152-64, 220-22.

[9] On the process of the redaction see Kuenen (1886), 313-42; Friedman (1981), 25-34; Knohl (1995), 101-03, 200-03.

lected the various legal codices, which developed within the different schools. No attempt was made to blur the differences between them; instead they were bound together in a single book.[10] This is the book of Torah or the Pentateuch, which we have before us today.

The use of the title Torah for the Pentateuch is a transformation of old priestly term Torah.[11] The term's bounds were expanded to encompass the whole collection of stories and laws embodied within the Pentateuch.[12]

We do not know precisely when the edition of the Pentateuch was undertaken, but it doubtless took many years. It reached its apogee with Ezra's publication of the Torah before the assembly of the people, as described in the Book of Nehemiah.[13] Biblical scholars consider this the occasion upon which the Torah was first publicly promulgated.[14] We are told that the people wept when they heard the Torah being read (Nehemiah 8:9), but the reason for their weeping is not stated. Apparently, they heard for the first time laws and commandments of which they had not been aware and had thus not observed.[15] Immediately after the reading of the Torah they celebrated the holiday of Tabernacles, Sukkoth, as it had never before been celebrated, for they had just been informed of laws pertaining to the holiday hitherto unbeknownst to them. For this reason it is written "...the Israelites had not done so from the days of Joshua son of Nun to that day..." (Nehemiah 8:17).[16] The people of that

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[10] The legal codes were put each in a separate place in the Torah see Kaufmann (1977), 393-94. Regarding the epic parts the policy was as follows: In cases where it was possible, different version were put side by side (for instance, the two creation stories in Gen. 1-3), where there was a fear of duplication (like in the flood story), different traditions were mingled and redacted together.

[11] On the history and the development of the term Torah in the Hebrew Bible, See Fishbane (1982), Cf. Greenberg (1995), 11-24.

[12] The first step in this direction was made in the book of Deuteronomy where the term תורה or ספר התורה usually refers to the book of Deuteronomy, see the discussion in the studies mentioned in the previous footnote.

[13] See Nehemiah 8:1-12. For the importance of Ezra's figure for the understanding of the axial transformation see, Fishbane (1992), 64-80.

[14] Cf. Wellhausen (1905), 404-09; Sanders (1974), 50-3. There are scholars who claim that the book of Ezra was not identical to the known Pentateuch Cf. Kuenen, (1886), 303; Kellerman (1968), 373-75; Noth (1966), 2, 76; Blenkinsopp (1989), 152-57. On the references to the Torah in Ezra—Nehemiah see Japheth (1988), 99-104.

[15] See Batten (1913), 357-58; Myers (1965), 154; Koch (1974), 182; Blenkinsopp (1989), 289.

[16] Cf. II Kings 23:22; II Chron. 30:26, 35:18.

generation had to internalize the abundance of information now before them, and this was far from easy. For due to its variegated process of formation, the Torah contains many contradictions and internal tensions, even in very mundane issues. Thus, on the eve of the Passover, one is commanded to sacrifice the paschal offering. In the Pascal Law in Exodus the instruction is "Do not eat any of it raw, or cooked in any way with water, but roasted... over the fire" (Exodus 12:9). The offering, then, should be roasted and not cooked. But in Deuteronomy we find that one is commanded to cook the offering: "You shall cook and eat it at the place that the Lord your God will choose" (Deuteronomy 16:7): The Torah contains contradictory instructions on this matter.

In Chronicles, which is among the later books of the Bible, an attempt was made to harmonize these contradictory commandments. In a passage on Passover held during the days of Josiah, we read: "They cooked the Passover sacrifice in fire" (II Chronicles 35:13), that is, the meat was roasted but the verb used to describe the process is "cook".[17] Another example pertains to the treatment of slaves. According to the Book of Exodus, slaves are to be released after seven years, and if a slave refuses to go free, his ear is to be pierced with an awl. The book says nothing about the piercing of a woman slave's (*ama*) ear (see Exodus 21:1-11). In the laws concerning slaves in Leviticus, there is no mention of releasing slaves every seventh year, rather they go free on the jubilee, that is, on the fiftieth year (Leviticus 25:39-41).[18] And in Deuteronomy we have yet another law. Here, as in Exodus, the slaves are released on the seventh year, but the piercing of the ear is applied to women slaves as well (Deuteronomy 15:12-18).[19] These are merely two of the numerous contradictions and tensions found in the Torah. The heterogeneous character of the Torah, then, makes it very difficult to use it as a basis for legislation. There existed an immediate and pressing need for an oral Torah to interpret and harmonize these contradictions. In this sense, the Rabbis were correct in claiming that the oral and the written

[17] See Seeligmann (1980) 31-2; Fishbane (1985), 135-36; Japhet (1993), 1053; Brettler (1995), 24.

[18] On this law see Knohl (1995), 216-18.

[19] The law in Deuteronomy also refers to the law in Leviticus, see, Japheth (1986), 63-89.

Torahs were given together.[20] The written Torah could not remain as it was; it needed to be explicated, resolved. And, indeed, the explication began immediately after the publication of the Torah.[21] The first passages of Midrash are to be found in the latter books of the Bible. [22] Later on, each group within the Jewish people formed its own Midrash.

The anonymous assemblers and editors of the Torah could, without doubt, have created a different book, one free of contradictions and tensions. We find in a later period, among the writings of the Qumran sect, that an attempt was made to produce a harmonized edition of the Torah, free of contradictions—this is their "Temple Scroll".[23] But the editors of the Torah did not choose this path. Instead they left us a book in which we find a variety of voices, a variety of colors. They recognized that God's word was not uniform. God spoke in many voices and people heard God in many ways. They did not want to mar the divine revelation, or detract from its fullness. They created a pluralistic book, which contains a variety of conceptions, a variety of customs and a variety of laws; passing this rich variety down to us, in the process.

The pluralistic edition of the Torah set the tone for Jewish literature. The Torah starts with a debate—"Mahloket", between two different and contradicting accounts about creation.[24] The editors put them side-by-side since in each of them there was a divine truth. In the same fashion, the Mishna, the most important legal collection of post-biblical Jewish law, begins with a debate about the appropriate time to recite the Shema in the evening.[25] All rabbinical literature is based on debate. The editors of the Mishna and of the Talmud followed the model of the pluralistic edition of the Torah. They put side-by-side different and contradicting views. They felt that all of them were the words of the living God.[26]

The editing of the Torah influenced another important process, the opening of the Torah to the general public. Up until that time, the Torah was reserved for experts. The priests specialized in prob-

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[20] See *Sifra, Behukotay*, 8:12.
[21] See Nehemiah 8:7-8, Cf. Fishbane (1985), 107-09.
[22] See Seeligmann (1980), 14-32; Fishbane (1985), 91-207.
[23] See Yadin (1983).
[24] The priestly tradition (Gen. 1-2:4a) and the J. account (2:4b-3:24).
[25] *Mishna Berachot* 1:1.
[26] אלו ואלו דברי אלהים חיים *Bavli Erubin* 13a.

lems of Temple ritual and thus all matters of sacrifice, purity and impurity were reserved for them; an outsider would have no comprehension of such matters. People in other realms specialized in other fields: the scribes in the king's court were experts in affairs of the state, the civil judges were experts in jurisprudence, and so forth. Up until that time, the average person had no access to the laws. If he or she were not a priest then he or she certainly could not inquire into the esoteric laws regarding the Temple and Temple sacrifices.

The process of the publication of the Torah—which began with the reading of the Torah in front of the assembly as described in chapter nine of Nehemiah—was an important event, which symbolized the opening of the study of Torah to the whole people. The Torah became a shared heritage. There was no specified house or family of Torah scholars; even the simplest of men from the poorest family could become the greatest Torah scholar. There are numerous examples in succeeding generations. Among them, Shmaiah and Abtalion (first century BCE), both the children of converts,[27] and Rabbi Akibah, and Rabbi Meir (second century CE), both of whose lineage is unknown.[28]

In the time of the First Temple there was no Rabbi Akibah, and it would have been inconceivable to have had such a person. Everything was rigidly set and contingent upon family relations. The publication of the Torah resembles a revolution, which radically changed the structure of Jewish society. The social standing of Torah students began to rise. Positions of leadership became accessible to people who gained their status through the study of Torah—not through their wealth or their origin. An outstanding Torah scholar could attain the level of a national leader—the spiritual leader of the nation. This represented a radical shift in the spiritual leadership of the Israel, and it took place in the priestly circles as well.

In the beginning of the Mishnaic tractate Abot, "The Sayings of the Fathers", the chain of reception of the Oral Torah is described. Moses received the Torah on Mt. Sinai and transmitted it to Joshua;

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[27] Bavli Gitin 57b. Cf. Zeitlin (1919), 61-7.

[28] All we know about Akiba's father is his name, Joseph. He probably was a poor peasant Cf. Finkelstein (1978), 18-20. We don't know the name of Rabbi Meir's father. He was probably also a descendant of converts, Cf. Cohen (1972), 51-9.

Joshua transmitted it to the Elders and so forth. The last group mentioned is the members of the Great Assembly (*Ha-Knesset Ha-Gedolah*). This, the Great Assembly, was convened by Ezra and Nehemiah. It was an assembly of the heads of the nation. The very next paragraph in the Mishnah tells us that Shimon the Righteous was one of the members of the Great Assembly (Abot 1:2). The era in which he lived is however unclear. According to some rabbinic sources he lived at the time of Alexander the Great, and indeed met with him when Alexander conquered the land of Israel (333 BCE). According to other sources, he lived well into the Hellenistic period.[29] Either way, Shimon the Righteous was a priest and the following saying is attributed to him: "The world stands on three things: Torah, Temple service and acts of loving-kindness".

The order in which Simon lists these is quite interesting; it is inconceivable that a priest in Solomon's Temple would say such a thing. The priests of earlier times would doubtless have said that most important are the Temple sacrifices; it is upon them that the world stands. As we have seen before, the concept of Torah in the priestly literature is very pragmatic. "Torah" is the word used to describe a set of teachings or laws governing a certain situation and pertaining to ritual. Shimon the Righteous reverses the order. "Torah"—here understood, as the study of Torah, and not in the practical sense in which it is used in Leviticus—is the most valued.[30] The Temple sacrifice is second and then acts of loving-kindness. The words of Shimon the Righteous epitomize the change, which had taken place in the consciousness of the priests. We have a group of priests who valued the study of Torah above all else.

Who were the editors of the Torah? It has long been accepted that the Pentateuch is based upon four principal sources. These sources are customarily denoted as follows: J, the source using the divine name *YHWH*; E, the "Elohist", who uses the name "Elohim"; P, the priestly source; and D, the book of Deuteronomy. Within the priestly source, Leviticus 17-26 stands out due to its linguistic and

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[29] On the legend about the meeting between Shimon and Alexander see, Gutmann (1940), 284-87; Goldstein (1993), 59-101. Cf. Moore (1927), 348-64; Van der Kam (1995), 303-18.

[30] See also the Rabbinic sayings on the three crowns (*Mishna Abot* 4:13; *Sipre Numbers* 119, ed. H. S. Horovitz p. 144) and the discussions of Flusser (1988), 286, note 13; S. A. Cohen (1990); Kister (1991), 202-12.

stylistic uniqueness. In some of the chapters the holiness of God is emphasized, and this was taken to imply a call to holiness addressed to all the Israelites. It has therefore been customary to call this section "The Holiness Code". The Holiness Code is denoted H, to distinguish it from the other parts of the priestly work, which are denoted P. In addition to its unique linguistic features, H includes many features that match the language of P. The common view was to see this as evidence that H antedated P and that the scribes of the P school edited H. However, in my book *The Sanctuary of Silence,* I have claimed that contrary to the common view, H is later than P. I have also found that many sections outside the Holiness Code that have hitherto been attributed to P are really part of the writings of the H school.[31] We must therefore recognize the existence of two separate Priestly sources, P and H. These sources represent, in my opinion, the work of two independent Priestly schools: One is the P school or, as I prefer to call it, the Priestly Torah, while the other is the H school, which I call the Holiness School.

The Holiness School is the circle within the priesthood that addressed the people as a whole and worked toward an integration of the popular and the Priestly faiths; this school of thought wanted to exit the ivory towers of the priesthood and approach the nation and to its spiritual needs.[32] Only the Holiness School, with its integration of both Priestly and popular contents, could have gathered all the different codes and traditions and forged them into a single book, for they alone were both tied to the Priestly heritage and open to the nation as a whole and in this manner could have acted as the cement, the bridge, reaching across the various writings. By making the priestly laws available to the whole nation in the framework of the Torah they gave the people access to the holy sphere of the sanctuary.

B. *Holiness*

The Priestly Torah, which we have mentioned above, was written by the old priestly school, which flourished in my view, in the period between the building of the Solomon Temple (tenth century

[31] See Knohl (1995), 9-110.
[32] Knohl (1995), 222-24.

BCE) and the time of the King Hezekiah and the prophet Isaiah (second half of the eighth century).[33] In this period priests in Jerusalem formed an elite group, closeted within the walls of the sanctuary, drawn toward the hidden, noble divinity ensconced within its shrine.

However, at the first half of the century, both Israel and Judea experienced a period of military success and economic prosperity. In the wake of financial prosperity, on the one hand, and a series of wars and conquests, on the other, we find in this period evidence of a widening social and economic gap within Israelite society.[34] A class of *nouveaux riches* emerged. They are described by the prophet Amos as lying on ivory beds, lolling on their couches, drinking wine incessantly and searching for ways to take from their poor neighbors (see Amos 6:3-6). This polarization caused an entire segment of the populace to lose its share of the land by forcing them to sell their fields and ancestral plots for subsistence. They were also forced to sell themselves into slavery to their wealthy brethren. The *nouveaux riches* were described by the prophets of the day as having been extremely meticulous in their observance of the commandments.

The great social and religious crisis of the eighth century bore within the priesthood a new desire to transcend the limits of the temple and enter the broad avenues of the nation, even at the price of surrendering the loftiness of earlier faith and practice of the priestly elite. This crisis, which is well attested in the writing of the prophets of this period, Amos, Isaiah and Micah, was expressed in the detachment between cult and morality. People thought that they might acquire sanctity through the meticulous performance of the cultic laws, ignoring at the same time the social—moral commandments. As it is well known, this led to a harsh attack of the prophets on the temple and cult.

The school of Priestly Torah had a unique conception of the relationship between cult and morality. This conception maintained a distinction between morality and religious ritual, two realms of religious life, which, according to the old Priestly Torah, were in no way interrelated. Morality was universal, while the divine revelation to the people of Israel was wholly in the realm of religious ritual and

[33] See Knohl (1995), 220-22.
[34] See Kaufmann (1968), 12-4.

worship.[35] It is clear that anyone who adopts this position cannot respond to the criticism levelled by the prophets. More importantly, the distinction between morality and religious ritual made it impossible to offer a solution to the deep crisis which the people of Israel underwent in the eighth century BCE, that is, to the social polarization and the tendency to observe ritual commandments meticulously while neglecting morality. The classical ideas of the Priestly Torah could offer no solution to these problems.

There was a need for innovation, for creative change from within the priestly camp, both in order to heal the ills of the people and to respond to the prophetic criticism. And indeed, we find that priestly thinking had undergone a profound change in the latter half of the eighth century. A new school of thought, the Holiness School,[36] arose. It produced a spiritual work of utmost importance and left its mark on the future development of the religion of Israel.

The most central aspect of this innovative approach had to do with the relations between morality and religious ritual. Whereas the classical priestly conception maintained, as we saw, a rigid distinction between the two, the Holiness School combined morality and ritual. As mentioned above, the main corpus of the writings of the Holiness School, "The Holiness Code"[37] is found in the second half of Leviticus, from chapter seventeen through the end of the book. The central section in this corpus is located in chapter nineteen. The chapter begins with a call to the people of Israel as a whole: "Speak to the whole Israelite community and say to them: You shall be holy, for I, the LORD your God, am holy" (Leviticus 19:2). Note, that not only the priests but also the entire people of Israel were called upon to be holy. How could they attain this level of holiness? How could the people become holy like God? The chapter enumerates a long list of commandments aimed at the elevation, to a certain degree of holiness, of those who observe them. They made observers like the holy God. Let us examine the content of this list.

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[35] See Kaufmann (1968), 137-48.

[36] For dating the Holiness Code to the second half of the eight century period, see, Eerdmans (1912), 101; Elliot-Binns (1955), 38; Haran (1968), 1098; Milgrom (1991), 26-7; Knohl (1995), 204-12.

[37] The German term is "Heiligkeitsgesetz" it was coined by Klostermann who identified this code, see Klostermann (1893), 368-413. For the Holiness School as the School behind this code and other parts of the priestly legislation, see Knohl (1995), 6, 101-10; 168-98, 204-20.

According to the classical formulation of the priesthood, holiness is tied exclusively to matters of religious ritual: sacrifices, holidays, the Temple and so forth.[38] And indeed, these elements appear in chapter nineteen of Leviticus. But alongside them we find explicitly ethical commandments, such as "Love your fellow as yourself" (Leviticus 19:18), "You shall not falsify measures... you shall have an honest balance, honest weights, and honest *ephah*, and an honest *hin* (units of measure)" (Leviticus 19:35-36). These commandments are found along with ritual commands: the offering of sacrifices is discussed alongside an interdiction against defrauding others and prohibitions against unfair commerce;[39] a command to keep the Sabbath and the holy days, alongside decrees to honor one's father and mother and to care for the underprivileged.[40] The underlying idea, then, was that if you want to be holy you must simultaneously maintain the ritual commandments and heed the moral injunctions. Working for social justice, caring for the poor and the weak, loving your fellow person, all these are part of the concept of holiness, according to the Holiness School.

The prophet Isaiah said: "The LORD of Hosts is exalted by judgement, the Holy God proved holy by righteousness" (Isaiah 5:16). We cannot determine who came first, did the priests of the Holiness School hear Isaiah prophesying in Jerusalem, pick up on the idea and give it a fuller expression, or was it perhaps the other way around? In either case there is clearly a great affinity between the two.[41] The difference is that Isaiah, like other prophets of his day, was thoroughly critical of contemporary religious rituals. The Holiness School, on the other hand, did not criticize the ritual aspect of religion at all—on the contrary; they fully embraced the ritual, but wished to emphasize the close affinity of ritual and morality as components of holiness.

As against the man described by the prophet Amos, who awaited the end of the Sabbath to resume selling his wares with a tilted

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[38] See Gen. 2:3 Ex. 26:33-4; 28:2, 36, 41; 29:1, 21, 29, 34, 36-7; 30: 25, 29-32, 36-37; Lev. 2:3, 10; 5:15-16; 6:10-1, 18-22; 7:1, 6; 8:9-12, 15, 30; 10:12-3, 17-18; 12:4; 16:2-4, 16-7, 19, 23-4; Num. 5:17; 6:5, 8, 20; 28:18, 25-6; 29:1, 7, 12.

[39] Cf. Lev. 19: 5-13, 35-6.

[40] Lev. 19: 3, 14-5.

[41] For other connections between Isaiah and the Holiness School, see Knohl (1995), 212-14.

balance,[42] the Holiness School places the commandment of Sabbath observance and the prohibition against deception in commercial dealings in the very same chapter (Leviticus 19:3, 36). To the rich man resting on his ivory bed[43] the Holiness Code says—the end of the Sabbath isn't a time to begin cheating with false measures; if the Sabbath is precious to you, you must also observe the adjacent commandment "You shall have an honest balance..."

The Holiness School also suggests a program of reform, to rectify some of the wrongs of the day. This reform is found in chapter 25 of Leviticus, and includes the law of the jubilee. The jubilee year is the fiftieth year, which occurs after seven remissions. According to the Holiness School the year of remission is the time in which all social inequity is redressed.[44] The people of that generation enslaved their poor brethren, selling a needy person for a pair of shoes. The Holiness School countered them by saying: none of the people of Israel can enslave their brethren, because all the children of Israel are slaves. So says God: "For they are My slaves, whom I free from the land of Egypt; they may not give themselves over into slavery... For it is to Me that the Israelites are slaves" (Leviticus 25:42, 55). When the Israelites were enslaved to Pharaoh in Egypt, they were Pharaoh's subjects, but then I, the LORD, smote Pharaoh and redeemed them from Egypt. In this they did not pass from slavery to freedom, but from slavery to slavery—now they are my slaves. But here's the catch: since they are the slaves of the LORD, a human being cannot enslave them. Whomsoever has been acquired by God and is God's servant, cannot be enslaved by another. On these grounds the Holiness School, for the first time in Biblical literature, rejects the concept of slavery, at least within Israeli society.[45] It recognizes the possibility of a person working for another man for pay, "He shall remain with you as a hired or bound laborer" (Leviticus 25:40), but not as a slave. Indeed, the concept of slavery is done away with. It is impossible for an Israelite to be enslaved to one of his brethren. They are all slaves of the LORD.

Another widespread phenomenon of the day was the eviction of the poor from their fields. Anyone who could not repay a debt could

[42] Amos 8:4-6.
[43] See Amos 6:4.
[44] Cf. Weinfeld (1990), 39-62; Weinfeld (1995), 75-96.
[45] Non Israelites can be enslaved, Lev. 25:44-6.

be forced to sell their field to the rich. Isaiah attacks this custom furiously, saying: "Ah, those who add house to house and join field to field, till there is room for none but you to dwell in the land!" (Isaiah 5:8). The Holiness School too sought to treat the eviction of people from their plots of land, from their ancestral heritage. Here again they employed the law of the jubilee which states, in essence, that no Israelite can sell his land to another because the LORD says "for the land is Mine; you are but strangers resident with Me" (Leviticus 25:23). The land, then, is God's and while God permits people to reside on the land, all are equally tenants. As such, no tenant would be permitted to deal in land as though it were his. That is why in the jubilee year anyone who was forced to sell his or her plot receives it anew. "In the year of jubilee, each of you shall return to his holding" (Leviticus 25:13). On that year, all those who work for other people should return to their homes, all slaves should go free and return to their homes, and all who sold their land should receive it back, without having to pay a thing. The lot of one's forefathers was given to him by the Almighty—he was a protected tenant of God's.

It seems that this reform was never implemented. Nevertheless, there are indications that the authors of the laws were not thinking in utopian terms,[46] but intended their application. Although there is no evidence to suggest that it took place, the sublime vision which was put forth by the Holiness School probably had a positive effect upon the people of Israel.

I have elsewhere[47] described the elitist and esoteric thinking of the Priestly Torah, which grew from within the confines of the Temple. And while it is true that this Code reached new heights of abstraction and sublimity in thinking about God, it's message was aimed at a select few. Only a handful of people could reach the religious summits of the Priestly Torah. The Holiness School burst the walls of the sanctuary and turned to the people as a whole. It relinquished the religious sublimity and embraced popular customs. The Priestly Torah treated the popular customs with a modicum of skepticism, as in the case of the people who come to offer their first fruit in order that they be granted a bountiful year. According to

[46] See Uffenheimer (1979), p. 9.
[47] See Knohl (1995), 124-64.

the Priestly Torah this custom is not a mandatory ritual.[48] For the Holiness Code, on the other hand, the law of the first fruit is very central and is thoroughly developed. It is a great religious obligation to bring one's first fruit to the Temple, as well as the *Omer* offering which signals the beginning of the grain harvest; great festivities were held in the Temple on that day (see Leviticus 23:9-21). This signified the complete acceptance of popular forms of worship and a synthesis of popular customs with the Priestly ritual.[49] This exemplified a willingness to relinquish Priestly elitism and accept popular customs, even if they did not match the Priestly standard of religious sublimity. The Holiness School intended to influence the people as a whole, to create an integration of the priesthood and the nation, and for this purpose they called upon the entire nation to lead a life of holiness. All the people of Israel became priests of sorts.

The symbol of a life of holiness is the commandment of *tzitzit*, fringes, a blue cord, which is to be attached to the corners of the garment (Numbers 15:38). The high priest, who stood at the pinnacle of the religious hierarchy, wore special clothes, which were not worn by any of the other priests.[50] One of these garments was a frontlet (*tzitz*) of pure gold which adorned the head of the high priest and which is fastened to him with a blue cord. The parallel is evident: a cord of blue and a frontlet (*tzitz*), a cord of blue and a fringe (*tzitzit*).[51] On the frontlet of the high priest it was written "Holy to the LORD" (Exodus 28:36), while the fringe indicated to its wearers that they should be "holy to your God" (Numbers 15:40). The Holiness School said, in effect, to every Israelite: if you observe the commandments—ritual and moral alike—you can attain a level of holiness which is akin to that of the high priest. The high priest is "holy to the LORD" while you will be "holy to your God". There

[48] Lev. 2:14-17. Cf. Knohl (1995), p. 24.

[49] Milgrom claims that the fact that according to the Holiness School this festival and its rites are held in a public form in the central temple should be seen as an evidence that this school deprived the individual farmer from "the experiential joy of presenting his private offering to his God", see Milgrom (1997), 88, n. 18. However, in my view the results of the centralization of the cult should not be taken as an indication of an intention to harm the popular cult, rather there is here an effort of integration of popular customs within the cult of the central Temple.

[50] Cf. Ex. 28:3 ff.

[51] See Cassuto (1967), 383.

is an equal opportunity for every one of the people of Israel to be holy.[52]

The Holiness School claimed that all the people of Israel were called upon to lead lives of holiness, which was not limited in time, somewhat akin to the life of a priest. Thus began a revolution in the religious life of the people of Israel. The effects of this revolution can be traced to the religious and spiritual development of Israel not only in the time of the first Temple, but to the second Temple as well.

C. *The Debate among the Sects on Access to the Holy*

The Holiness School set the foundations for the central idea of Second Temple mainstream Judaism, which was later to continue among the Pharisees. This approach was characterized by a synthesis of the priestly conceptions (attention to the Temple and the sacrifices) on the one hand, and concern for matters of justice and righteousness, (acts of loving kindness in Shimon the Righteous' words) on the other.

Alongside this current, there were other sects, the Saducees and the Qumran sect, who may have opposed the revolution brought about by the Holiness School, and who wanted to preserve the uniqueness and the isolation of the priesthood and of its laws, as well as the uniqueness and isolation of the Temple service. A debate was waged between the central current and those who wanted to turn back the clock and recede once again into the priestly ivory tower. This debate was one of the central traits of Second Temple Judaism, and it manifested itself in different sects and schools of thought which developed during that time.[53]

Throughout the year, Pharisee Halacha ("Halacha" is the religious law) set very strict laws of purity and impurity and distinguished between "associates" (*Haverim*)—those who observed these laws—and "commoners" (*Am Ha-Aretz*)—who did not. Yet during the holidays (this is true of all the holidays, not only Sukkot) they instated a new rule: "all the people of Israel are associates". During the pilgrimage to Jerusalem, even the most common people who knew nothing of

[52] Cf. Milgrom (1990), 413-14.
[53] See Knohl (1992), 601-09.

the laws of purity and impurity, and may have even scorned these laws, were to be regarded as "associates", without their having to perform any sort of action. The very fact that they gathered in Jerusalem, at the Temple, endowed them with the status of "associates" and they were permitted to enter the Temple. The sages grounded this ruling in their interpretation of the verse "Our feet stood inside your gates, O Jerusalem, Jerusalem built up, a city joined together" (Psalm 122:2-3), saying "'a city joined together'—that is, a city which joins all the people of Israel together as associates" (Jerusalem Talmud, Hagigah 3:6). All the strictures were eased to cater to the needs and yearnings of the people and to integrate the people into the Temple services. In these holidays, a profound bond was formed between the Temple, the priesthood, and the people. This is the Pharisee approach.

The Sadducees and the Boethusians, a group closed to the Sadducees, opposed this approach, and made every effort to disrupt the Pharisee ceremonies. In the Tosefta (a supplement to the Mishna), the story is told of how one year "Willow Day"—the seventh day of the holiday of Sukkoth in which they circled the altar seven times—fell on a Saturday. So as not to desecrate the Sabbath, the Pharisees picked their willows in advance and set them in the Temple courtyard so that they would be ready for use on the morrow. The members of the sects tried to outwit them, reasoning as follows: the Pharisee sages are known for their strict observance of Sabbath laws and will not carry heavy stones on the Sabbath. Let us, then, cover the willows with heavy stones and thus the willow ceremony will not take place. The Pharisee sages were probably quite confounded. They probably began debating whether or not it is permitted to carry heavy stones on the Sabbath. But the problem was resolved: the common people came and carried off the stones. They did not observe the Sabbath laws very strictly and wanted the willow ceremony to take place in any case (see *Tosefta* Sukkah 3:1).[54]

Another tale is told regarding the water libation. Once a high priest who was sympathetic to the Sadducee or the Boethusian Halacha[55]

[54] As was already claimed by several scholars [Cf. Albeck (1952), 255, Herr (1981), 16; Tabory (1995), 175-200], it seems that the Boethusians rejected the ritual per se, not only its performance on the Sabbath.

[55] According to Tosefta Sukka 3:16 he was a Boethusian, according to the Talmud (Bavli Sukka 48b , Yerushalmi Sukka 4:8 54d) a Sadducee. Cf., Sussmann

took the libation flask and poured the water not on the alter but onto his feet! Needless to say, this caused a great uproar among the people, who "...pelted him with their citrons, and the corner of the altar was damaged" (*Tosefta* Sukkah 3:16). That is, one of the four corners of the altar was broken when they pelted him with their citrons. Again we see the desire of the sects and their sympathizers among the priesthood to disrupt the Pharisee ceremony,[56] and, on the other hand, the great popular support these ceremonies enjoyed. The people would do anything to ensure that the ceremony took place, and would harm anyone who tried to disrupt it.

These sources attest the objection of the Sadducees to the rituals that were intended to bring rain and fertility. This rejection is in my view a result of their theology which rejected Divine providence and ordered worship of God without anticipation to material reword.

The very fact that the people were in the proximity of the Temple during the holidays was itself controversial. The Pharisaic Halacha, which permitted all the people into the Temple Courtyard, irrespective of their degree of purity or impurity, was disputed. This is particularly evident with regard to the custom of exhibiting the Temple vessels. This custom was instituted in order to link the people as a whole to the experience of holiness. All year long, the vessels were located within the Temple, and only a priest who had undergone ritual purification could approach and see them.[57] The Pharisee sages allowed the Table of the "Showbread" and the Menorah to be set outside,[58] apparently at the gate of the Temple. The people,

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(1990), 48-53. Josephus Flavius tells similar story about Alexander Yannai, the Hasmonean king who was also a high priest (*Ant.* 13:372); the high priest in the Talmudic sources is anonymous).

[56] Rubenstein (1995), 121 no. 67 and Rubenstein (1994), 417-44, argue against the common view that the Sadducees rejected the ritual of Water Libation because it has no explicit source in the Torah. The author claims rightfully that "the view that the Sadducees rejected 'the Oral Torah' and that this comprised the essential debate between the groups oversimplifies matters." Cf. Sussmann (1990), 57 no. 185. Nevertheless, I cannot accept his conclusion that the Sadducees did not reject the legitimacy of the libation but had only different view as to how the ritual should be performed. In my view the traditions dealt in this chapter show clear objection of the Sadducees to the rituals which were intended to bring rain and fertility. This rejection is a result of their theology which rejected Divine providence and ordered worship of God without anticipation to material reword.

[57] According to the priestly laws of the Pentateuch non-priests who look at the holy vessels which are within the temple, will die (Num. 4:18-20) Cf. Haran (1985), 178.

[58] Mishnah Hagigah 3:5, Yerushalmi Hagigah 3:8 (79:4), Bavli Hagiga 26:2.

then, had full access to them, and, most likely, some people could not completely avoid touching them. Any such contact would transmit to the vessels the impurity found in the person who touched them, but this did not deter the Pharisee sages.[59] This, it seems, was the apex of the people's proximity to the Temple.

A coin minted during the Bar Kokhba period depicts the Temple and the table at its entrance.[60] The person who drew the picture lived during the time of the Bar Kokhba revolt, at least sixty years after the destruction of the Temple. But he or his informant had probably made the pilgrimage to Jerusalem as a child, and remembered the Temple and the table, which he saw at the time. This was the summit of the pilgrimage: viewing the table and the Menorah at the entrance to the Temple. The Tosefta tells that once the Menorah became impure due to these public exhibitions and had to be purified through immersion in water. The Sadducee sages mocked the Pharisees saying: "Come and see Pharisees immersing the light of the sun" (*Tosefta* Hagigah, 3:35). The Menorah symbolizes the sun, and yet see what they have done—they have caused the sun to become impure so that it now has to be immersed. There is more than just scorn in these words—they are filled with anger and bitterness;[61] in their eyes this was sacrilege.

The Qumran scroll known as "The Temple Scroll" expresses a similar criticism of the Pharisee Halacha. As noted above, this scroll is a reworked harmonized text of the Torah; it also contains laws not mentioned in the Torah. In a section, which deals with the table, we find a strict warning: "It shall not leave the Temple".[62] In my

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[59] In Papyrus Oxyrinchus V, 840 there is a report about a discussion between a High Priest and Jesus. The High Priest rebukes Jesus and his disciples who come to view the sacred vessels, though not properly purified. See Grenfell and Hunt (1908). As has been correctly noted by Buechler (1908), 338-39, this discussion should be understood on the background of the above mentioned Rabbinic texts. Although the papyrus states that the High Priest was a Pharisee, this statement should be attributed to the polemic, anti-Pharisaic tendency of the composition. We know that most of the High Priests in the late Second Temple Period were Sadducees. Thus, if this story does reflect a historical reality, it probably preserves the echo of Sadducee criticism of the custom of displaying the vessels to the populace.

[60] See the studies of Barag (1977-78), and Grossberg (1978-79), 81-2.

[61] See Sussmann (1990), 68.

[62] See Yadin (1983), 306.

view, this warning refers to the Showbread table, stipulating that the table must not be removed from the Temple.

We find a great willingness on the part of the Pharisees to go to great measures—including the temporary lifting of interdictions and limitations—in order to have the people participate in the Temple services. This participation was expressed first and foremost in the ceremonies, which aim at procuring prosperity and agricultural abundance. This is the point of community between the Pharisees and the masses, the common people. Opposed to them are the Sadducees and the Boethusians who reject the inclusion of the masses, reject the lifting of interdictions (a sacrilegious act, in their eyes) and reject the very legitimacy of ceremonies aimed at procuring abundance. The purpose of worship was to draw closer to God, not to satisfy human needs. This bitter dispute can point us toward another issue, which is also attested to in a number of different sources.

Up until now we have discussed the holidays. But there was an attempt made by the Pharisee sages to form a bond between the people and the Temple throughout the year. The Temple was the site of daily sacrifices, an additional sacrifice on the Sabbath, and special sacrifices on the holidays. The Pharisee sages agreed that these sacrifices be purchased with donations taken up from the people as a whole. The donation consisted of one half shekel, which was collected once a year, before the month of Nisan. Collection was not limited to the Jews in the land of Israel, but included those living in the Jewish Diaspora. There is evidence of great caravans, which would come to Israel to bring the contributions of the Jews living in the Diaspora.[63] The significance of this contribution was that every Jew had a part in the Temple sacrifices. When he or she went to the Temple and heard that sacrifices were being offered, he knows that they were made possible in part by his or her contribution. The Halachic approach of the Sadducees and the Qumran sect rejected this approach. The Sadducees ruled that the daily sacrifices could be funded by contributions of individuals (Babylonian Talmud, Menahot 65a).[64] Unlike the Pharisees, who interpreted Biblical law regarding the contribution of half a shekel (Exodus 30:11-16) as an

[63] Cf. Safrai (1974), 188-92.

[64] In Ms. Michal 388 of the *Scholion* to *Megillat Ta'anit* this view is related to the Boethusians See Lichtenstein (1931-1932), 323. Cf. Noam (1997), 65-7.

annual contribution, the Qumran Sect interpreted it as a contribution made once in a lifetime, when the person reached the age of twenty.[65] Here too we see that the Pharisees attempted to link the Temple service to the people by using their contribution for the daily cult. Each Israelite could feel that the daily offering came from his own donation. On the other side, the Sadducees and the Qumran sect viewed the Temple cult as a realm reserved exclusively for the priests.[66]

It seems that the matters discussed here indicate the source of the support for the Pharisees among the people. For in a sense this phenomenon is an enigma, considering the severe rulings of the Pharisees on matters of purity and impurity, tithes and other contributions. One could even say that these strictures should have caused a schism in the nation, between the "associates" and the "commoners". The bitterness which many of the commoners felt toward the Pharisees is evident in Talmudic sources, and more clearly in the New Testament: The people viewed the separation of the "associates" as an insult, and there was even a certain degree of hatred toward the Pharisees. Be that as it may, we learn from the New Testament, from Josephus and from the writings of the Qumran sect, that most of the masses sided with the Pharisees. Now, why would the masses support the same Pharisees who caused a schism within the nation and elicited much anger and resentment with their stern rulings on issues of purity and impurity, tithes and contributions? I believe the answer may be found in the issues discussed above. While it is true that throughout the year the strictness of the Pharisees formed a divide between them and the general public, the same Pharisees allowed the people to express their anxieties and their yearnings during the critical period of the holidays. During these times, the Pharisees drew the people closer to them and allowed them to express their feelings and needs through the Temple services.

It seems to me that this accounts for the popular support enjoyed by the Pharisees.[67] The other sects, on the other hand, refused to

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[65] See Allegro (1968), 7, l. 4. Cf. Liver (1961), 18-21; Flusser (1961), 150-56; Beer (1962), 298-99.

[66] Cf. Bickerman (1936), 351-56; Bickerman (1980), 161-72; Liver (1963), 173-98; Mantel (1983), 214-217; Sussmann (1990), 67 no. 220; E. and H. Eshel (1992), 617-20.

[67] Cf. Sussmann (1990), 66-8.

acknowledge the needs of the people, and did not permit them to express those needs in the Temple service. In this they erected a barrier between the people and the Temple, and lost the support of the commoners. Thus, the willingness of the Pharisees to rule that "All the people of Israel are associates" for the duration of the holidays, and to integrate the people in the Temple services, garnered them the support of the people and allowed them to maintain their position as leaders of the nation even after the destruction of the Temple.

Summary

We have examined three cases of developments with regard to holiness and holy objects: The holy book, Torah, the concept of holiness and the holy vessels. In all three cases we saw a tendency to extend the limits of the sacred and to enable access to the holy for all the people. This change should be seen in my view as an Axial Age transformation. This transformation was led by the "Holiness School", which was a priestly-popular school. The Pharisees later developed this trend. On the other side, stood the old priestly school, the school of the Priestly Torah. Subsequent adherents to this school were the Sadducees the Boethusians and the Qumran sect, who opposed the revolution brought about by the Holiness School, and wanted to preserve the uniqueness and the isolation of the priesthood and of its laws, as well as the uniqueness and isolation of the Temple service.

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THE JEWISH HISTORICAL EXPERIENCE: HETERODOX TENDENCIES AND POLITICAL DYNAMICS IN A DE-TERRITORIALIZED AXIAL CIVILIZATION

S.N. EISENSTADT

Introduction

The starting point of my analysis of the Jewish historical experience in the framework of comparative universal history is a critique of Max Weber's analysis of Jewish civilization, focusing on a very striking contradiction in his argument.[1] On the one hand he analyzes Ancient Judaism as one of the Great Religions—one of those breakthroughs which have revolutionized the history of mankind.[2] This approach foreshadows Jaspers's later interpretation of the Axial Age. On the other hand the subsequent, post-second-Temple exilic Jewish historical experience is portrayed by him as that of a "pariah" people—a people basically outside the frame of active history. This is reminiscent of, although certainly not identical with, Toynbee's conception of Jewish civilization as "fossilized",[3] and certainly not imbued with Toynbee's rather strong, even if often subdued, antisemitic connotations.

According to such views, the crux of such change was the emergence and hegemony of the "Oral Law" (*torah shebe'alpeh*) characterized by increased emphasis on legal-ritual prescriptions based on the exegesis, study and continuous elaboration of texts, and on communal

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[1] For an earlier examination of Weber's analysis of Ancient Judaism see Eisenstadt (1981a) 54-73, 217-34; and Eisenstadt (1981b) 134-85.

[2] Weber (1952) and the articles in Schluchter (1981).

[3] Toynbee (1947). In a later shortened edition, Toynbee revised his interpretation of the nature of Jewish existence in the Diaspora. For this version see Toynbee (1972), a new edition reviewed and edited by the author and Jane Caplan.

prayer as the focus of Jewish religion and tradition. At the same time the view of the Jews as a "pariah" people was supported by observing the transformation of the political and universalistic components of Jewish collective consciousness and Jewish collective life under the predominance of the Halakha, especially the apparent "bracketing out" of collective Jewish active participation in the general political arena.[4]

Two aspects of Jewish exilic, medieval historical experience have been invoked to support such a restricted view of "medieval" Jewish civilization. One is the seeming almost total absence, in that historical experience, of strong sectarian and heterodox movements—one of the hallmarks of axial civilizations, including the early Israelite civilization. The second is the bracketing out of the political dimension from the communal life and consciousness of the Jewish people—manifest also in their historical passivity, of non-participation in the historical arenas of their host civilizations.

The Crystallization of the Halakha Framework The Civilizational Context of Jewish Historical Experience

In the following pages I shall examine these assumptions and draw tentative conclusions concerning the major characteristics of Jewish civilization.

Does a close analysis of Jewish life in the long medieval period support the view that the most frequently noted features—the concentration of most cultural activities in the legal-ritual arena, and the cultural self-closure of Jews in their communities—exhaust the Jewish medieval historical experience? Does it justify the view of Jews or rather of Jewish medieval civilization as a tradition within which there was no place for great cultural and institutional creativity, or for any sectarian heterodox or antinomian tendencies?

Here it might be worthwhile to examine in greater detail some of the central aspects and the historical context of the crystallization of the halakhic rabbinical mold, the mold of the *tora shebe'alpeh* (Oral Law), and its hegemony in Jewish communities. Of central importance for our analysis is the fact that this mold developed within the broader framework of the transformations—cultural, ideological, as

[4] On these visions see Toynbee (1972) op. cit.; Weber (1952) op. cit.

well as institutional—of Second Temple Jewish civilization which was in turn constructed upon earlier "Israelite" foundations of the First Temple but also greatly changed them and transcended them in important respects.[5]

The ancient Israelite and early Jewish collective experience bore some of the most salient characteristics of the so-called "Great Religions" or "axial" civilizations.[6] It entailed the promulgation of a transcendental vision which called for a reconstruction of the world, of communal life, and the structure of the family. Like other axial civilizations, the ancient Israelite and above all Second Temple Jewish civilization developed some distinct characteristics of its own. First, it developed an extremely profound emphasis on the covenantal, semi-contractual relationship between God and the tribes of Israel, the people of Israel. The covenant with God was seen as the central focus of the tribal confederation, of the process of forging the Israelite tribes into a distinct nation as God's chosen people.

The focus of the special, distinct way in which this collectivity, this—to use a modern, not entirely appropriate, term—nation, was constituted, was the promulgation of a rather unusual combination of communal and cultic law and calendar prescriptions, religious and ethical commandments together with civil laws. There was a very strong emphasis on social legislation—like the laws of the Sabbath and of the Sabbatical year, in which all debts are cancelled. These laws were given a religious and ethical connotation, giving rise to what David Weiss Halivni called "justified law."[7] The promulgation of these visions, cultural themes and formations was combined in the ancient Israelite and in later Jewish civilization with the construction of a distinctly "national" (or "ethnic") political community or collectivity. This entailed concomitant interweaving of universalistic and particularistic orientations and continuous tensions among them, in the definition of this collectivity.

This vision was represented by various distinct, autonomous, cultural groups or elites such as—during the period of the First Temple—the priests, Levites, and perhaps above all the prophets. These different groups did not merely claim to have their own distinct, separate domains; they also aimed to participate in the com-

[5] See Eisenstadt (1992) ch. III.
[6] Eisenstadt (1986).
[7] Halivni (1986).

mon political, legislative, and cultic frameworks and to promulgate different interpretations of the common visions. The conflicts and tensions that arose among these elites and sub-elites, reflected not only different interests or differences with respect to varied technical details of cults or of law, but also distinctive interpretations of the tradition and distinctive emphases on its cultic, legal and ethical components. These groups competed for acceptance as the representatives of the higher authority to which rulers and community were accountable. Such claims were rooted in a combination of older tribal tradition and of the covenantal ideology which emphasized that all members of the community were partners to the covenant with God.[8] Among these groups, as in all the other axial civilizations, continuous struggles and confrontations—as well as cooperative relationships—which paved the way for the later development of sectarianism developed.[9]

With the emergence of several new cultural or ideological orientations—as well as new patterns of communal life and leadership—within the Jewish community in Eretz Israel during the Second Temple period, these basic characteristics of ancient Israelite civilization were transformed in significant ways. Most importantly, the monopoly of access to some of the attributes of holiness, sacrality and sacredness held by priests and sometimes kings (and, paradoxically, also by more individual and charismatic elements such as the prophets) was weakened, although not fully obliterated. The central sacred arena became more and more accessible to all members of the community. A concomitant increased emphasis on a new type of communal cohesion, based on the conception of a "holy community," as a constituent component of the collective religious-political identity developed.[10]

At the same time, a more diversified model of political-religious leadership was established. This created the basis for more intensive communal conflicts. New, often competing, criteria of leadership and elite status were articulated. The channels of mobility into the upper religious and civic positions and political leadership were increasingly opened to all members of the community—probably

[8] Cohen (1990).
[9] Eisenstadt (1986) op. cit.
[10] Baer (1985) part 2.

more so in the period after the destruction of the Second Temple than before. Closely related to this, the idea of the accountability of the rulers to a higher law became highly crystallized, with fierce competition among the different elite groups as to which was the true representative of this higher law.[11] Simultaneously tensions developed between the strong elitist orientation based on the study of the law, and the broader populist base that emphasized prayer, observance of rules and membership in the holy community. New themes were promulgated among these various groups: philosophical, mystical as well as apocalyptical ones, often related to the encounter with other civilizations, but also built on internal developments of the tradition.[12]

Many of these new themes were promulgated by a new type of cultural and political elite—the scribes (*sofrim*), the members of the Great Assembly, and the leaders of a host of religious-political movements and sects, the best known of which were the various groups that identified themselves, or were identified by others, as the Pharisees.

All these new elite groups shared some of the characteristics of many of the elites of the First Temple period, especially their relative symbolic and organizational autonomy and the strong interweaving of political and religious orientations. They differed, as indicated already above, from the elite groups of the earlier periods, as well as from the priestly families of their own period, in the relative weakness among them of both ascriptive (priestly) and individual-charismatic ("prophetic") components.

Another crucial development in this period was the appearance of multiple diasporas as a permanent feature of the Jewish experience, giving rise, to use S. Talmon's expression, to a "multicentric" situation.[13] This added a new dimension to the heterogeneity of the structural elements in Jewish life and the volatility of the geographical or geopolitical situation of the Jewish people, which became even more pronounced with the final disappearance of Jewish political independence and the growing ideological identification of dispersion with Exile.

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[11] Eisenstadt (1992) op. cit.

[12] On the importance of apocalyptical themes in the Jewish tradition see Stroumsa (1984) and Gruenwald (1998).

[13] Talmon (1978) 43-7.

Various institutional molds, including the incipient mold of the Oral Law, crystallized in close relation to these orientations and themes. The multiple intellectual-institutional molds that crystallized within Jewish society throughout the period of the Second Commonwealth entailed developments, which have indeed been fully recognized in Jewish and general historiography of proto-sectarian or sectarian tendencies. They were focused upon different interpretations of the basic components and orientations of the continually crystallizing Jewish civilization.

The groups or sects which developed in this period shared an emphasis on the combination of the basic components of this civilizational vision—of civil, communal and cultic law and calendar prescriptions, religious and ethical commandments, together with a very strong emphasis on social legislation, and prescription of different "religious" practices. They differed greatly with respect to the relative weight of these components and their interpretation. They all promulgated different cultural themes—philosophical, mystical and the like, many of which developed out of the interaction with other—especially Persian and Hellenistic—civilizations, and different definitions of Jewish collectivity and collective identity in relation to other societies and civilizations.[14]

A very central component of the basic orientations of these different groups, movements or sects was indeed the relation of the Jewish collectivity to other civilizations, and they developed different visions of the relations between the particularistic and universalistic components of Jewish identity. The tension between these different components, especially with regard to relations to other civilizations, became more sharply accentuated through the encounter with Hellenism. Thus, for instance, as Shaye Cohen has shown, it was indeed in the period of the Second Temple, and as a result of the encounter with Hellenism, above all in the Maccabean period, that the dual nature of Jewish identity developed: as a traditional community even if with specific relations to other communities, and as a way of life (or in our terms as a civilization).[15] Since then the concern with the relations to other civilizations has been a ba-

[14] Tcherikover (1959); see also Hengel (1974) and the classical Bickerman (1988).
[15] Cohen (1990) 204-23.

sic concern of Jewish groups and sects—and very often a bone of contention between them.

All these tendencies and controversies were not purely of an "intellectual" or "academic" nature. They were initiated and reinforced by the new types of leadership that developed within the framework of Jewish communal institutions and networks. Whatever the differences between them, these groups, with the possible exception of some of the "scroll" sects, did not exist in separate enclaves, but shared common social and cultural frameworks—even if they differed with respect to the relative centrality of the symbolism of the Temple or the Torah.[16]

Contrary, however, to the implications of later literature, these sects and sectarian tendencies cannot be fully described as heterodoxies, as in the period of the Second Temple no clear hegemonic orthodoxy developed.

During the first two or three centuries which followed the destruction of the Second Temple, many sects and groups remained active in Judea and Galilee, in the various diasporas, and in the desert in the form of various Samaritan or Hagarist groups. Some of the latter became closely connected to a new and powerful universal civilization: Islam.[17] These sects, prominent among them the Pharisees, the Sadducees, the several "scroll" sects, various groups in the multiple diasporas, and, in the first centuries of the Christian era, various Jewish-Christian groups,[18] were in this period vying for hegemony, or at least for autonomy in the construction of their distinctive spaces.

Parallel to these developments a marked change took place in the structure of Jewish social and institutional organizations. It was a shift to communal organizations, rabbinical and communal courts and centers of learning and the contacts and economic relations among them. Despite the far-reaching changes that occurred after the destruction of the Second Temple, a striking continuity or at least similarity, and even intensification of older characteristics can be identified in the new types of leadership in relation to the old one, especially in their relative autonomy and the continual competition between them.

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[16] See Eisenstadt (1992) op. cit. and Schwartz (1995) 3-47.

[17] Cook and Crone (1977). This view has not been accepted by all students of early Islam.

[18] Flusser (1988).

The competition between these groups and sects (which were still related by their common origin in Jewish civilization) and the claims of each of them to be the true bearer of this civilization, was often quite bitter and intense. From this competition the predominance of rabbinical Judaism gradually emerged—a predominance that would continue up to the end of the "medieval" and the beginning of the modern period.

It took a relatively long time—until the fifth or sixth century of the Christian era—for this orthodoxy to become fully institutionalized. Even when this mold was crystallized, many of the sects and sectarian orientations were not obliterated; they were basically, as it were, forced underground onto the margins of Jewish society or the interstices between the Jewish, Christian, and Islamic civilizations. Moreover, the different themes propagated by these groups were never fully subdued, and their influence persisted even after the crystallization of this mold, the mold of the Halakha—i.e. of the entire corpus of Jewish post-biblical law, "Oral Law" distinct from but in continuation of the "Written" Law of the Pentateuch and the Prophets. The essence, the central focus of this mold was indeed the seemingly total supremacy of the Halakha, of the Oral Law, its exposition, study and interpretation as the major arena of the implementation of the distinct Jewish transcendental vision, of the covenant between God and the Jewish people, and the major regulator of all aspects of Jewish life.

Sectarianism and Heterodoxy at the Beginning and Toward the End of the Halakha Predominance; Potential Challenges to the Halakha in the Period of its Hegemony; Internal and Intercivilizational Dimensions

The basic characteristics of this framework have often served as evidence for the interpretation of Judaism as a "fossilized civilization", and of the Jews as a "pariah people". Nevertheless, a closer look at the crystallization and development of the Halakha presents a rather different, more complex picture. Closer examination indicates, first, that the development and hegemony of Halakhic Judaism cannot be understood except as a continuation, even if dialectical, of Jewish civilization as it began to develop in the period of the First Temple and crystallized in a more distinct intercivilizational mode in the period of the Second Temple. Second, the Halakha emerged not as "natural" development, but through continual struggle be-

tween different groups and tendencies, which had strong roots in the preceding period. Closely related to this is the fact that many of the sectarian orientations which were so strong in the phase of crystallization were never obliterated, nor were many of the themes that had been inherited from the preceding period. Their influence persisted even after the definitive formation of the Halakha, and out of them there could develop at least potential challenges to the dominant framework.

To understand the nature of such potential challenges to the Halakha that persisted, even if often in muted ways, throughout the medieval period, it might be worthwhile to look first of all at those obviously heterodox groups which crystallized at the very beginning of the full crystallization of this order and towards the end of its hegemony. These were the Karaites (the great heterodox group which challenged the rabbinical hegemony from the sixth century onwards) on the one hand, and the Marranos (the "converted" Jews in and from Spain before and after the expulsion of the Jews from Spain in 1492), and of course the later Sabbatean movement (the great Messianic movement led by Sabbatai Zevi from Izmir in the midst of the seventh century) on the other.[19]

In both cases, the negation in principle of the hegemony and validity of the very core of the Halakha was central to the respective heterodoxies. Similarly, in both cases, this negation was based on a strong combination of religious themes together with different definitions of Jewish collective identity, its relations to other civilizations and perhaps, above all, its political component.

The Karaite heterodoxy became crucially important to the life of Jewish communities, especially, but not only, in the Middle East. Religious and philosophical confrontation between rabbinic and Karaite Judaism, and the continual interaction between the two camps in social and economic life, constituted a basic fact of Jewish history for many centuries. Rabbinic Judaism ultimately won, but the confrontation with the Karaites was not an easy one.[20]

Among Marranos, especially in the Low Countries, those who retained some degree of Jewish identity, heterodox tendencies de-

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[19] On the Karaites see Schwartz (1992) 229-40. On relevant aspects of the Karaite Halakha see also: Erder (1995) 37-67; Erder (1992) 263-83 and Erder (1994) 195-215.

[20] See Schwartz 1992 and 1994.

veloped which challenged the hegemony of the Halakha and proposed various versions of a new non-Halakhic, potentially even secular, definition of Jewish identity.

Very strongly antinomian, potentially even fully heterodox attitudes, even if they did not entail a secular definition of the Jewish collectivity, developed later on in the Sabbatean and Frankist movements which had strong roots among the Marranos. Later on, the problem of the primacy and predominance of the Halakha in relation to the constitution of Jewish collectivity also constituted the central focus of the various reform movements in modern Judaism—and in a powerful but different way in Hasidism. But such heterodox tendencies were not limited to these "dramatic" cases. They were simmering throughout the Middle Ages among many groups of Kabbalists, mystics and philosophers.

What was the common denominator of these unequally developed antinomian, sectarian or heterodox tendencies? It was not the standing of the Halakha itself as the major regulator of Jewish life that was called into question. It was rather the assumption, fundamental to the hegemony of the Halakha, that it constituted the major or only way to implement God's vision for Israel, which served as the starting point of dissent, articulated in various ways by various kabbalists, mystics, ascetics, or philosophers.

It is true that the Halakha, in contrast for instance to the Islamic legal frameworks, has been very open, not only in fact but also de jure, emphasizing strongly the possibility of autonomy of new interpretation. Nevertheless, however open it may have been in comparison with other civilizations, in the eyes of Halakhists this discourse was internally self-regulating, and did not need any legitimation beyond itself.

Although the groups which promulgated mystical, ascetical, kabbalistic, philosophical or proto-scientific thinking, did not usually challenge the prescriptive dimension of the Halakha, and the legitimacy of study and prayer as the major arena of implementation of the specific Jewish vision, many of them did not always fully accept its internal self-legitimation, and above all the vision that it constituted the major, possibly exclusive arena of the implementation of God's vision for the Jews as His "Chosen People". Moreover, beyond this questioning lurked a much more radical possibility, namely, that the Halakha itself may at times be superseded as the major arena of the implementation of God's vision for the Jewish

people by other types of cultural creativity.

One of the most important indications or illustrations of such antinomian or heterodox potentialities can be found in the field of the Kabbala. As Jacob Katz has shown in a series of incisive articles,[21] it is possible to distinguish between two types of scholars who engaged in kabbalistic studies and possibly also practices. One was represented by the scholars who saw the Halakha as the major arena of appropriate study, and for whom kabbalistic meditations and practices were but supplementary to it. There were, however, others who saw the study of the Kabbala and the engagement in kabbalistic practices as epitomizing the proper way to implement Israel's mission.[22]

The same was, in principle, true of the study of philosophy which could be viewed as even more dangerous to the bearers of the Halakha. Thus the many injunctions against studying philosophy, or any other alien wisdom by the young who have not yet immersed themselves in the study of the Talmud and commentaries, and the limitations placed on the time that could be devoted to such studies.

Such heterodox or antinomian attitudes to the non-halakhic arenas of study or behavior often referred to concepts that were central in Jewish religious discourse. One such concept was that of the "hidden" or "true" Torah, or the secrets of the law, given to Moses side by side with the "open" revealed law, the Halakha.[23] Another very important theme in this context was that of the "reasons" or "justifications" of the prescriptions (*ta'amei ha-mitzvot*).[24]

These concepts were imbued with powerful antinomian potentialities. They implied—or could be interpreted as implying—that the revealed Torah with its injunctions and prescriptions was in some sense secondary, even if legitimate in its own contexts, and that "behind" it there existed the "true" or hidden Torah which could be revealed only to special people—usually members of some sects, or in more propitious circumstances or times possibly in the messianic era. This hidden or "real" Torah could be seen as the true manifestation of God's vision for Israel which might, could, or should

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[21] Katz (1984) 70-101 and 237-55.

[22] See also Idel (1988).

[23] Uffenheimer (1984).

[24] Twersky (1982); Twersky (1980); Twersky (1972); Twersky (1990) and Funkenstein (1993). For an earlier discussion see Roth (1933).

in appropriate circumstances supersede the revealed Torah. This concept could indeed entail a strong antinomian attitude to temporal, historical process. It could entail the possibility that while the revealed Torah is indeed binding in the present diasporic existence it may be superseded with the coming of the Messiah—when the hidden Torah will replace the revealed one.

Similarly, the very "need" as it were to justify the major prescriptions could lead to attempts to find such justifications beyond the vision of the Halakha as the direct, exclusive command of God to the Jewish people.

These challenges to the Halakha were not just technical or ritual ones, nor did they constitute just a "simple" weakening of the hold of tradition. They were closely connected to the promulgation of the major cultural and civilizational themes that constituted foci for the self-definition of the Jewish community and of its intercivilizational relations which developed within the fold of Halakhic Judaism, but with very strong roots in the preceding periods. These themes entailed very strong intercivilizational dimensions, which were closely interwoven with the major cultural themes developed in the preceding periods. They were replete with many internal tensions.

The most important of such themes, the kernels of which could be discerned to some extent during the Second Temple period and became more fully articulated and incorporated into the Jewish tradition, were the metaphysical and ideological evaluation of Eretz Israel, the ideology of *galut (*Exile) and Eretz Israel, the fuller articulation of messianic visions, and of the solidarity of the Jewish people.

Dispersion was not unique to the Jews—many peoples in antiquity and later on experienced it—although its scope and continuity probably were. What was unique was the tendency to identify dispersion with Exile, and to endow the combined experience of dispersion and Exile with a strong metaphysical and religious negative meaning of *galut.* Explaining the fact of *galut* became a major concern of many, if not most, Jewish philosophers and scholars, and a central concern of Jewish religious discourse.[25] In most cases *galut* was seen as basically negative, explained in terms of sin and punishment. Life in *galut* was defined as a partial, suspended existence, but at the same time it had to be nurtured in order to guarantee

[25] Baer (1936); Baer (1947). See also the new French edition, Baer (2000), with a critical introduction by J.H. Yerushalmi.

the survival of the Jewish people until the Redemption.

This negative evaluation of *galut* focused on two closely connected but sometimes antithetical themes: the lack of political sovereignty (*shi'abud malkhuyot*), and the partial and distorted spiritual or religious existence that was seen as the negative metaphysical evaluation of *galut*. These two themes were often combined, but different scholars or groups emphasized them to different degrees.

The political and the metaphysical or redemptive themes were also central in the attitude toward Eretz Israel and in the articulation of messianic visions. The growing metaphysical relationship to Eretz Israel, in a sense, was the counterpoint to that toward *galut*, often enunciated by the same thinkers, yet with some difference.[26] Eretz Israel was defined in both primordial and political terms—possibly more than in the period of the Second Temple; but—and this constituted a great innovation, even if built on earlier foundations—there was also a growing metaphysical relationship to it.

These attitudes toward *galut* and Eretz Israel converged around the third theme, which in a sense subsumed them: the messianic and eschatological one. Rooted in the early Second Temple period, possibly even in the period of Babylonian exile, it found expression in the various sects of the Second Temple period as well as in Christianity. The proper interpretation of the Messiah who would come at the end of Time became the central focus of controversy between Judaism and Christianity. The salience of this point was intensified by the loss of political independence, dispersion and expulsion, and the contours of the messianic vision were more explicitly elaborated around the basic motifs of political and religious redemption.[27]

Another basic theme that became fully articulated during this long era, as a dialectic counterpart to the messianic hope, was that of martyrdom. *Kiddush Hashem*, the sanctification of God's name through martyrdom, dates back at least as far as Roman times. It reached full expression in the wake of persecution and pogroms, was legitimized in terms of the basic religious chasm between Christianity and Judaism when the Jews were often called upon to choose between apostasy and death, and became a permanent theme of Jewish col-

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[26] Ben Sasson (1984); Hallamish and Ravitzky (1991) and Schweid (1979).

[27] Yuval (1993) 33-99, also see the various articles in *Zion* (1994), which take up critically various aspects of Yuval's thesis.

lective consciousness, emphasizing the Jews' complete commitment to their tradition.[28]

A complementary theme was Jewish solidarity, *Ahavat Yisrael*, "the love of Israel," the need to close ranks in the face of external threats. This theme, which emerged both at the ideological and at the more popular levels during the long period of *galut*, was closely related to various aspects of the constitution of the Kehillot and their regulation with respect to mutual help within each Kehillah, and between Kehillot. It is closely related to self-imposed segregation, to ambivalence and often intolerance toward other religions. In its extreme manifestation it could easily turn into intense xenophobia.[29] The very promulgation of these themes with their roots in the preceding periods entailed continual internal tensions—tensions which became intensified when these themes became interwoven with "older" but continually transformed ones—philosophical, mystical, pietist, and the like. These were all fraught with many antinomian and even heterodox potentialities with respect to the predominance of the Halakha.

Beyond "Fossilized Civilization" and "Pariah People": The Intercivilizational Dimensions of Medieval Jewish Civilization—The Cultural and Political Arenas

These tensions and dynamics generated continual cultural creativity belying Toynbee's designation of medieval Jewish civilization as "fossilized". It is rather difficult to envisage why the host civilizations—Christian and Muslim—would bother to maintain continual and highly ambivalent relations with a fossilized civilization, and above all to engage in a continual cultural debate with it.

But more important indeed, contrary to Toynbee's conception, Jews continuously participated in the cultural arenas and discourses of their host civilizations. The mere fact that there were important philosophers, mystics, and the like among the Jews in the Middle Ages is not the point. Three specific and closely interrelated aspects of their activities are of crucial importance.

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[28] On Kiddush Hashem see Ben Sasson (1971-72) 981-86; and Lamm (1971-72) 977-81.

[29] Ben Sasson (1976).

First is the fact that the great philosophers—Sa'adiah Ga'on, Yehudah Halevi and many others, and above all Maimonides—were not isolated or marginal figures. Their activities, including their Halakhic expositions, constituted an integral component of medieval Jewish cultural creativity.

Second, these activities and studies—sometimes the more ritual and legal ones as well—were not confined to the framework of the Jewish community, but were part of the general medieval cultural scene, sharing many of the common problematics of the three monotheistic civilizations. The philosophers, and to some degree the legal scholars, often wrote in Arabic; they had close relations with non-Jewish scholars, and often provided mutual reference points for one another. Indeed, the definition of what was specifically Jewish, Christian, or Muslim frequently emerged from the continual controversies among them.[30] Thus for instance, as Malachi Beit Arieh has shown, the Hebrew manuscripts which abounded in Europe and in Muslim countries in the Middle Ages contained many references to Western philosophy, Christian mysticism and the like, and Jewish philosophers and scholars were employed by some rulers, such as Frederic II in Sicily.[31]

The third paradoxical but crucial fact in this context is that these controversies usually were not just academic exercises or polemics; they bore the hallmark of heated and intense intercivilizational or interreligious competition. Indeed, the exegesis and interpretations of biblical texts constituted the central aspect of this intercivilizational discourse.

No less do these tensions and dynamics belie Weber's designation of the Jews as a pariah people. The term "pariah people" derives from the analysis of Indian society and refers to the untouchables beyond the caste system. But the analogy with the Indian situation is poor at best. In this context it should be emphasized, first, that the ritual segregation of the Jews was in many ways self-chosen and not just imposed by others—and indeed by being self-imposed could

[30] See on the general background: Funkenstein (1993), ch. 4, "Medieval Exegesis and Historical Consciousness," and ch. 6, "Polemics, Responses and Self-Reflection," 81-131 and 169-220 respectively; Segal (1986); see also Lazarus-Yafeh (1992) and Moore (1987).

[31] Malachi Beit-Arieh, "Hebrew Manuscripts of East and West: Towards a Comparative Codicology," The Penuizi Lectures, 1992, London, The British Library, 1993.

constitute a challenge to the host civilization. Second, the very existence of the above-mentioned disputes indicates that if the Jews were just a sort of low caste or non-caste, their host civilizations would not have needed to keep proving their superiority, nor have constantly attempted to convert them.

This misplaced analogy with India is part of a more general problem with respect to Weber. His view of the nature of the change in the basic characteristics of the Jewish historical experience after the rise of Christianity ignored very crucial dimensions of the Jewish medieval historical experience. As we have seen, Weber stressed that after the period of the Second Temple the Jews became a purely religious, and not a political community, in contrast to Christianity's development into a politically dominant world religion. But this is a misleading picture, even if it contains some elements of truth.

As we shall see, the apparent bracketing out of the political dimensions or orientations by the bearers of the Halakha did not make intercivilizational relations and confrontations irrelevant to the construction of the Law. There is no denying the very intense creativity, heterogeneity, dynamics, and "openness" of this period of the Jewish historical experience. Of crucial importance from the point of view of this analysis is the fact that the various tensions and dynamics analyzed above, with their potential heterodox and even antinomian tendencies, developed not only with respect to the internal dimensions of Jewish identity and culture. All these "internal" themes were indeed continually related to the problem of relations of the Jews to the other, monotheistic, civilizations.

The belief of the Jews in the universal significance of their religion did not abate, even if in fact they could no longer compete openly with other civilizations and had to invest most of their energies in safeguarding their own cultural-religious framework by maintaining a firm control of their way of life, through segregation from the host society and construction of relatively closed collective boundaries.

The bracketing out of active independent collective participation in international historical experience, and above all—as we shall see—in the "historia sacra" of their host civilizations, did not entail—contrary to the suppositions of Toynbee and to some extent of Weber, and also, although mostly implicitly, of large parts of modern Jewish historiography—a retreat from civilizational visions, or an abdication of the claim to be a civilization of universal sig-

nificance. Truly enough Jews could no longer realistically compete actively with other civilizations, although these civilizations continued to fear such competition.

Indeed even in these circumstances, the legitimacy which the Jews claimed for themselves, and which was also accepted, albeit in ambivalent or negative terms, by their host societies, was not only religious or "cultic." Throughout this long period of Halakhic predominance, the intercivilizational component—in relation above all to the two other monotheistic civilizations—continued to be central in the definition of Jewish collective identity. Christianity and Islam, "axial" monotheistic religions with claims to universality, were attempting to construct civilizations that encompassed all those with whom they came into contact, including, of course, the Jews. Above all, Christianity, and in a somewhat milder version Islam as well, were historically related to the Jewish religion and people, to Jewish civilization. This historical—and in the case of Christianity highly ambivalent—relation was a basic constitutive point of their self-definition. The relations among the three monotheistic civilizations were defined in terms of common historical-religious origin, and the denial by the Christians—and to a lesser degree by the Muslims—of the legitimacy of Jewish non-acceptance of Christianity, or of Islam. At the same time each of these civilizations strongly emphasized those of its premises which differentiated it from the other two, as indications of its relative superiority. The history of the Khazar-Jewish kingdom in the Lower Volga region is of very great interest here. However unclear the details of its history, the very fact that a pagan king chose to convert himself and his kingdom to Judaism, presumably in order to avoid being embroiled in Christian-Muslim rivalry, attests to the fact that Judaism existed—or at least was conceived—as a potentially active actor on the intercivilizational scene.

These mutual intercivilizational attitudes were not purely intellectual or academic, although they were a very central concern of theologians and scholars, significantly enough also, perhaps especially, those who were concerned with the interpretation of the Bible. These attitudes constituted central components in the self-definition and legitimation of these civilizations, and the ideological core of their interrelationships. Since Judaism was seen as a potential threat to the legitimacy of the hosts' own religion, a basic ambivalence with regard to the Jews developed in both Christianity and Islam—far beyond their attitude to other minorities. This added a new dimen-

sion to the political subjugation or dispersion of the Jews, which was seen, especially by the Christians, as evidence of the loss of their place as the "chosen people." Thus tense, hostile and ambivalent relations developed between the host societies and the "guest" Jewish communities—each trying to assert the basic legitimacy of its own civilization. The hostility found expression not only in pogroms, persecutions and expulsions, but also in ideological dimensions, as manifest, inter alia, in the frequent polemical debates between Christian priests and theologians and Jewish rabbis and theologians, in attempts at forced conversion, and in blood libels accusing Jews of killing Christian children and drinking their blood. All these aspects were reflected in Jewish conceptions of martyrdom as sanctification of the Name (of God) (*Kiddush Hashem*).

The consciousness of such potential competition was present in many of the themes that developed within the Jewish community and bore the kernels of antinomianism with respect to the basic attitudes of most of the bearers of the Halakhic framework to political activity. For example, many of the messianic themes entailed specific orientations to the "host" civilization and often indicated the nature of ambivalence towards them. As the late Gershon S. Cohen has pointed out, and as has more recently been shown in greater detail by Israel Yuval, far-reaching different conceptions of redemption, especially of redemption through vengeance as opposed to redemption through conversion, developed.[32] These conceptions necessarily entailed deep-seated ambivalence, often hostility, to the host nations.

Such consciousness of the ambivalence, indeed potential hostility between the Jews and their host civilizations seems to have pervaded not only the more intellectual, messianic or mystic orientations but also, as for instance Elliot Horwitz has shown, some of the more popular carnival-like festivals such as the Purim celebrations which were also perceived as expressions of such hostility by non-Jews.[33]

This analysis bears also very closely on the second question raised by Weber's analysis—namely the extent of active participation by the Jews in the major, especially political arenas of their host civilizations. The usual view, interestingly and perhaps paradoxically

[32] Cohen (1991) especially "Messianic Postures of Ashkenazim and Sepharadim"; Yuval (1993) op. cit. and Yuval (1994) 351-414.

[33] Horowitz (1994) 129-68.

espoused also by modern Zionist ideology and to some extent also by Zionist historiography, is that during the long medieval period the Jews were basically, by virtue of their "pariah" status, politically passive, being at most supplicants before the respective powers-that-be.

The theory that before their re-entry into history the Jews were merely passive objects in the major political arenas of their respective host societies is, of course, valid to a certain extent. It is true that Jews, as a minority within monotheistic civilizations, were often viewed as problematic by their host societies, and were under constant threat of expulsion and persecution. In this respect they were indeed passive. Yet throughout the long period from late antiquity to the Middle Ages, Diaspora Jews fared no worse than many sectors of the Muslim and Christian world in which they lived—they fared better, in fact, than some members of the peasantry and the bourgeoisie. Not only was the economic status of Jews generally better, but they were often active players in the game of politics both at home and across borders.

A closer look at Jewish political organizations and activities throughout the Middle Ages—in Muslim and Christian lands alike—indicates that the Jews, whether collectively or as individual agents, were not limited to playing the part of "Court Jews" or petitioners but could take on important political roles, in the patrimonial settings of Southern France, or in such organizations as the Council of Four Lands (Vaad Arba Aratzot) in Poland or in the Council of the Communities of Lithuania.

They were admittedly not top political players—kings or members of the high aristocracy—and they did not engage in military campaigns, even if individuals sometimes became military leaders. But they were not always entirely passive either. For long periods of time they were allowed to play an important, even if limited, role in the corporate world of medieval Europe, or in the different communal politics of Muslim lands.

Needless to say, such political activity could be, and often was, precarious; Jews were indeed often subject to persecutions and expulsions. But during periods when they were not—and these in qualitative terms, were probably the longest in the history of their respective countries, although there was, it is true, always some threat of persecution and expulsion—they could act not only as petitioners, depending on their relative numbers, their relations with rul-

ers, their place in the economy and the like. Of special interest in this context are indeed, as mentioned above, the Khazars, one of the most enigmatic cases of medieval history.

Thus indeed, as earlier Simon Dubnov and later and perhaps more emphatically as Baer and Momigliano[34] have indicated, and contrary to Max Weber's view of the Jews as a pariah people, Jewish identity throughout this long "medieval" period had a political dimension. This was often associated with a strong transcendental orientation. Even in this period Jews continued to search for ways to forge a cultural, symbolic, institutional framework that would enable them to maintain their political, religious and ethnic identity and sustain some of their claims to universal validity. Communal arrangements and political institutions, whether in Babylon of the Gaonic era, or in Lithuania in the seventeenth century, were often perceived by Jews as an extension of Davidic rule—with Messianic overtones. This dimension was manifest in the emphasis placed on collective salvation and political redemption and in the definition, unique among a dispersed people, of the experience of Exile in metaphysical terms, combined with a metaphysical definition of the primordial relationship between the Land of Israel and the people of Israel.

And yet in one crucial sense the Jews were indeed excluded—and on the whole, with the significant partial exception of the Messianic movements, excluded themselves—from "history," not the mundane history which in those periods was not usually defined as history at all, but from "historia sacra": the eschatological history defined in terms of a Christian vision. They were excluded—and excluded themselves—from playing an active role in the eschatological historical scenarios of world history as it was then conceived.

Thus indeed, Jews could no longer realistically compete actively with other civilizations, although in these civilizations the fear of such competition persisted. But the tensions between the host monotheistic civilizations and Jewish communities throughout the medieval period were of continuous relevance for the construction of Jewish collective identity and collectivity which continued to harbor strong political orientations and components, and of crucial importance in the transformation of many of the older Jewish civilizational themes

[34] Momigliano (1970) 313-18; Baer (1947) and Dubnov (1967-73).

and the development of new ones. Moreover, it should be noted (as a fact of special importance for our discussion) that the development of such themes also generated or intensified *potential* sectarian or heterodox orientations within the framework of Halakhic Jewish civilization.

The Internal Dynamics of Medieval Jewish Civilization

The preceding analysis bears closely on the characteristics of medieval Jewish civilization—beyond notions of a "fossilized civilization" or a "pariah people." It is only if we take into account that the crystallization of the mold of Halakha did not abate the concern with the definition of the Jewish collectivity and its intercivilizational relations; and that this concern gave rise to continual promulgation of multiple cultural themes which were crucial in the Jewish self-understanding—that we understand that there developed within the mold of the Halakha, the possibility of the transformation of seemingly legal semi-technical disputes into antinomian and possibly even heterodox potentialities; the possibility that these disputes and controversies between all these groups would be not only purely dry, legal ritual controversies—"just" various secondary interpretations of the dominant Halakhic mold—although many of them were indeed such secondary interpretations, focusing mainly on concrete technical details of Halakhic legislation. But beyond many of the discussions around such legislation, focused as it was on the sphere of learning and ritual observance, continuous tensions and struggles concerned with the problem of the legitimation of the Halakha developed. These entailed the possible questioning of the centrality of the study of the Halakha as a central factor in the implementation of the Jewish transcendental vision. The recognition of this fact can be seen in many of the Halakhic proscriptions.[35]

All these tendencies and controversies were not purely of an "intellectual" or "academic" nature. As in former periods, they were reinforced by the new types of leadership that developed within the framework of Jewish communal institutions and networks. Despite the far-reaching changes that occurred following the destruction of

[35] See Katz (1984) 70-101.

the Second Temple, a striking continuity in characteristics can be identified between the new types of leadership and organizations and those which developed in the darker periods of Jewish history.

The major elite groups in most Jewish communities always comprised some combination of three elements: the stronger, wealthier oligarchic stratum; would-be popular political leaders; and the learned class of rabbis, scholars and mystics. They usually composed the ruling coalitions that controlled community life. The last of these elements, be they rabbis who exchanged responses, mystics, kabbalists, or philosophers, tended to develop a degree of specialization and autonomy in supra-communal and even transnational networks. Among these different leadership groups, as in the preceding periods, internal tensions and competition developed due to the fact that—despite all the changes—they all shared the basic beliefs and orientations of Jewish civilization, particularly a strong commitment to the belief that all members of the community had access to the realm of the sacred.

It was the combination of these different types of leadership and modes of communal organization, with the promulgation of the various multiple cultural and religious themes and orientations that gave rise, just as in the preceding periods of Jewish history, to an intense dynamic in Jewish communal life, and to patterns of cultural creativity. These possessed strong sectarian or even heterodox potentialities that could take a political turn.

The attitudes of the bearers of the Halakha—i.e. the hegemonic cultural groups in Jewish societies—to all these potentially antinomian themes and orientations were rather ambivalent. On the one hand, as I. Twersky has shown in great detail in a series of incisive studies, there were those scholars who attempted to imbue the very study of the Halakha with some spiritual dimensions, to incorporate philosophical and mystical themes, attempting to create a united framework which would indeed contain all these components without, of course, giving up the predominance and basic autonomy and self-legitimation of the Halakha.[36] On the other hand, the bearers of the Halakha were indeed suspicious of the potential religious antinomies inherent in these themes (for instance, the "spiritual," as distinct from

[36] Twersky (1983a) ix-xx; Twersky (1983b) 431-59 and Twersky (1974) 69-83.

political, dimensions of the messianic vision) and of their power to disrupt both the authority of the Halakha and the precarious existence of the dispersed Jewish communities. Still, they were not able to suppress or do away with them.

Between these tendencies continuous tensions developed. Very often those scholars who promulgated the first view could be seen by others as the very bearers of such antinomian tendencies. The fear of the potentially antinomian possibilities of these tendencies and orientations was fully recognized by them.

Thus, for instance, the famous Talmudic ruling, strongly upheld by Maimonides, that there is no difference between the messianic and contemporary reality except *shi'abud malkhuyot*, that is, the lack of political independence, was probably oriented against the more religious, spiritual, or redemptive interpretation of the messianic vision. The very continual promulgation of this ruling attested to the tension between the "spiritual," religious view and the more mundane, especially political, dimensions of the messianic orientation and also to the strong antinomian potentialities which contained a strong implicit challenge to the legitimation of the Halakha—which indeed became fully realized in the Sabbatean movement and its aftermath.[37]

To consider a less dramatic illustration, some of the regulations about the extent of fasting permitted on Shabbat were not just technical legal injunctions but were oriented against potentially very strong, ascetic tendencies that were dominant in some sectors of Jewish society.[38]

Similar illustrations can be brought with respect to philosophical, mystical, and kabbalistic themes, as well as to attitudes to "science" and secular learning,[39] as well as with respect to themes more specifically related to the experience of life in dispersed communities in the Diaspora, in constant tension with their "host" civilizations. Thus for instance the emphasis or "overemphasis" on martyrdom sometimes developed as a reaction against the sages who sanctified

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[37] Scholem (1973); Ravitzky (1991); Twersky (1980) op. cit.; Twersky (1972); Twersky (1990) and "Maimonides: Political Theory and Realistic Messianism" in Funkenstein (1993) 131-54.

[38] Gilat (1992) 109-22.

[39] On the attitude to Science in the Medieval Jewish Culture see Freudenthal (1995) 23-58; Freudenthal (1993) 29-136 and "The Threshold of Modernity" in Funkenstein (1993) 220-56.

the preservation of life and tried to minimize the overt tensions with the host people—though of course not at the cost of apostasy. At the other pole of this discourse controversies developed about the extent to which the community or families should pay ransom for captured Jews—one of the major themes of Jewish solidarity.

Truly enough, whatever the strength of all these antinomian tendencies or potentials, they were indeed during most of this long "medieval" period contained or hemmed in within the broad framework of the Halakha. Most such heterodox tendencies were indeed very muted. It was indeed characteristic of the situation in medieval Jewish history that it was the Halakha itself—the promulgation of Halakhic prescriptions, above all with respect to study and prayer—that constituted the major arena in which these potentially heterodox orientations were, as it were, worked out. These orientations became especially visible in their attempts to influence the Halakhic daily ritual or prescriptions with their own orientations—and were often opposed by the more orthodox bearers of the Halakha.[40] Yet they were not able at the same time to suppress or do away with them. Accordingly rabbinical orthodoxy, without entirely denying any of these different orientations, always tried to keep them within the strict limits of the Halakhic discourse and, on the whole, to subsume them as secondary elements within the framework of the Halakha. Although never obliterated, they were in principle denied symbolic and, especially, organizational autonomy.

But such potential heterodox tendencies, however muted they were, did exist. Not only did they influence some dimensions of the Halakhic legislation, but they represented important components of Jewish life, and were foci of cultural creativity and subterranean developments. It is indeed only this heterodox potential that can explain the development and characteristics not only of the different Marrano, Sabbatean, and Frankist movements, but also of some of the later movements of emancipation and assimilation that developed among Jews in the late eighteenth century.

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[40] Katz (1984) op. cit.

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POLIS, "THE POLITICAL", AND POLITICAL THOUGHT: NEW DEPARTURES IN ANCIENT GREECE, C. 800-500 BCE

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In the introduction to the 1986 volume on Axial Age civilizations,[1] S. N. Eisenstadt identifies their most important characteristic as "the perception of a sharp disjunction between the mundane and transmundane worlds... [and] a concomitant stress on the existence of a higher transcendental moral or metaphysical order which is beyond any given this- or other-wordly reality."[2] A similar point is also made in the introduction to the section on ancient Greece, where Eisenstadt emphasizes again "the recognition of a far-reaching chasm between the transcendental and cosmic order and the mundane one. The homology between these two orders was no longer accepted, and the exploration of the relations between the two became one of the major intellectual concerns..."[3] Yet Eisenstadt also observes "a very strongly this-wordly orientation of the transcendental vision... The attitudes to the cosmic order were mostly those of exploration and much less of its creation or reconstruction in terms of the transcendental vision or of its being oriented by some transcendental power."[4]

Eisenstadt and his predecessors search for a set of common elements that would help define and explain major changes and break-

[1] I am writing this chapter primarily in my capacity as a historian of Greece. My interest in comparative history has so far been directed more towards early developments in Rome and only recently, in connection with my exploration of the beginnings of political thought, towards the ancient Near East. However, in the context of this discussion on axiality, I think that it is especially necessary to take a close look at a number of specific developments in ancient Greece, along with their causes, or background in a precise manner.

[2] Eisenstadt (1986), 3.

[3] Ibid., 29.

[4] Ibid.

throughs that seem to have occurred almost simultaneously in the early history of human civilizations from the Mediterranean to China. Such attempts are most insightful, even visionary.[5] However, one of the crucial components of this process, namely the emergence of a "transcendental vision", seems to take in ancient Greece a form that differs significantly from that found everywhere else. Moreover, if the religious dimension of this "transcendental vision", heavily emphasized by Eisenstadt, is taken as seriously as it should be taken, we are forced to conclude one of the following. Either the Greek version was so much weaker, or so radically different, that it does not really fit the pattern; or, the pattern itself was defined too narrowly in the first place. The latter is precisely what Johann Arnason seems to be suggesting, when he argues that theoretical accounts of the Axial transformations place too much emphasis on a relatively uniform pattern, such as the distinction between transcendental and mundane realities, and that the historical diversity of interpretive frameworks has yet to be given its due.[6]

This problematic is central to my present chapter. In Greece, the breakthrough which, on the political-intellectual level, led to the development of political thought and "the political", was indeed entirely "this-wordly" in its orientation, while the ways in which the divine world and cosmic order were envisaged were initially dominated by this very orientation despite strong Near-Eastern influences. Some forms of "transcendental vision" emerged among the early philosophers, who speculated on the origins of the cosmos, the elements that the natural world consisted of, and operated with, and the nature of the divine. These ways of thinking triggered a number of intellectual developments and had enormous long-term effects, yet initially remained marginal in their influence on social and political organization and structure, and on the behavior of both elites and commoners. Even political thought was influenced more by the forms than by the contents of such thinking.

With very few exceptions, clearer formulations of the separation between the transcendental and the mundane and efforts to link the

[5] See the survey and discussion by Arnason (this volume).

[6] See Arnason's contribution to this volume, as well as the general introduction. The discussions at the conference decidedly pointed in the same direction; see Eisenstadt's closing remarks in this volume.

two more closely (in thought, social structure, and political organization) began in the second half of the fifth century and developed more fully in the fourth century and the Hellenistic Age. This happened initially as a response to a profound crisis of values and traditions, frequent civil strife, and destructive wars, then as a consequence of the unification of vast parts of the ancient world under Macedonian rule. This later period, when economic and political processes prompted intellectual and cultural interaction on an almost global scale, is obviously of crucial importance to the phenomena discussed in this volume, but lies beyond the chronological boundaries of this chapter.[7] Here, the question I will be examining is, rather, why the Greeks pursued their own track—and a markedly different one—in a development (the "Axial Age transformation") that shows many similarities in several civilizations. Before, however, I turn to this question, I want to explain first the way in which Greek politics and political thought were entirely "this-wordly" in their orientation.

The "This-Wordly" Orientation of Early Greek Political Thought

The so-called Archaic period of ancient Greek history (c. 800-500 BCE) is pivotal to the examination of these questions. Most of the developments that resulted in the best-known and most significant political, intellectual, and cultural achievements of the Greeks in the fifth and fourth centuries had their roots in this period, or even earlier, in the so-called Dark Ages (c. 1100-800). I begin with a few comments on the Archaic Greek views concerning the nature and role of the divine.

Most Greeks believed in the existence of gods and spirits, who would be everywhere and whose goodwill was essential to a good and successful life. For our purposes, it is important to understand

[7] I suggest that more or less analogous developments previously occurring more or less independently in various "axial civilizations", now (with the obvious exception of China, which remained largely unaffected by the "Hellenistic universe") came into much closer contact and interacted much more intensely, perhaps even merged with each other. This enhanced the "axial dimension" of civilization and created a new, more advanced "platform" which, reinforced by the cultural homogenization, and facilitated in the east by the Parthian/Sassanian and in the west by the Roman empire, proved indispensable for further "axial developments" such as Christianity and Islam.

how early Greek thinkers saw the interaction between the divine and the human spheres. The issue of the "Homeric religion" is complex and much debated. Clearly though, interaction with gods was one of the elements that bestowed the epic world with its heroic dimension. However, and this is crucial here, in many, if not most, cases, divine actions and reactions in the epics represent human sentiments or emotions writ large and projected onto a superhuman level.[8] For instance, uncontrollable anger, overwhelming desire, or amazing turns of events are explained with reference to divine influence; interaction among gods serves to illuminate human interaction, and seemingly superhuman effort or achievement become understandable when linked to divine support. In most cases, the divine element can be lifted off without substantial loss to the logic of the action, and the gods appear in many ways so human that it is easy to understand Xenophanes' biting criticism in the late sixth century, that both "Homer and Hesiod have attributed to the gods everything that calls for blame and reproach among humans: stealing, adultery, and deceiving one another."[9] To be sure, Zeus is also thought to play an important role in the political and social spheres. He blesses and legitimizes the leaders—an idea that recurs in Hesiod—and protects not only heralds and ambassadors but also suppliants and other weak members of society. All this is easily understandable: leaders need superior legitimation and the gods are called into service where humans fail to provide order and protection—in the no-man's-land between, on the one hand, the semi-autonomous households (*oikoi*) within the community (*polis*) and, on the other, between the *poleis*.

It is important to stress here that the gods hardly ever act arbitrarily or on their own initiative. Usually, they react to events, deeds, or provocations on the part of humans. Divine will or fate normally coincides with the consequences of human actions or decisions. Divine and human causation seems to pull developments in the same direction.[10] In the end, Troy must fall not only because it is *fated* to fall but also because the expiation of *human* wrongdoing calls for its

[8] Adkins calls the gods "immortal aristocrats" (Adkins (1997), 709). On "Homeric religion," see, e.g., Griffin (1980), chs. 5—6; and Erbse (1986). On Homer generally, see Morris and Powell (1997). On "Homeric society", see Raaflaub (1997a).

[9] Diels and Kranz (1961), no.14 B11.

[10] This is closely comparable to the relationship between divine and human causation in Herodotus.

destruction. After all, did Troy's ancient founder not deceive the gods? Did the king's son not raid another community (Sparta) and abduct the leader's wife (Helen) with many valuables? And what is more, did he not also refuse to return what he stole and pay adequate compensation? Hence the cause of the Greeks is just. Both fate and justice demand the same outcome of the war. If Zeus delays the victory of the Greeks and brings them close to disaster, this is not because he wishes Troy to survive (although he does) but because Agamemnon has wronged Achilles and needs to be taught a lesson.

The gods thus do assign punishment to humans (and the victims of wrongdoing pray to the gods to do so), but they are credited with this role primarily because human society does not have sufficiently just and strong agencies of its own to serve this function. The poet of the *Odyssey* says so explicitly at the beginning of his epic. In an assembly of the gods, Zeus complains about Aegisthus, who, ignoring explicit divine warnings, seduced Clytemnestra and, with her help, murdered Agamemnon.

> Ah how shameless—the way these mortals blame the gods.
> From us alone, they say, come all their miseries, yes,
> but they themselves, with their own reckless ways,
> compound their pains beyond their proper share.[11]

In other words, all mortals are assigned their "share" (*moira*) but they cause most of their sufferings themselves. Overall, the problems tackled by the poets' ethical and political reflection fit into an entirely human framework of cause, effect, and responsibility. The gods punish evildoers and their communities. Through seers, poets, or leaders blessed by them, they may offer advice about salutary measures to be taken in a crisis, but they neither cause nor resolve such a crisis. In human society, crisis is the result of specific human mistakes or irresponsible acts, and, as such, it must be resolved by society itself. Right from the beginning, therefore, Greek thinkers focus on human responsibility in connection to the wellbeing of the community.

Hesiod, Homer's slightly younger contemporary, offers further illustration of this.[12] Integrating a heavy dose of Near-Eastern myths,

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[11] *Odyssey* 1.32-34.

[12] For an introduction, see, e.g. Solmsen (1949); Tandy and Neale (1996). On Hesiod's political reflection, see Raaflaub (1989), 19-24.

he created a genealogy of gods and divine forces, the *Theogony*. Yet the poem's purpose is much more complex. Hesiod categorizes all the powers and forces that influence human wellbeing, and fits them into a comprehensive system. Traditionally, such forces were imagined to be divine, and a standard way of setting up such a system was by making use of personification and genealogy. Yet the conventional aspects of Hesiod's poetry should not deceive us. What we find there, in fact comes close to abstract reasoning and systematic thinking, and, through the personification of the wives and descendants of Zeus, his system encompasses even the characteristics of the good leader and the values which mark successful leadership and guarantee the wellbeing of a community.[13] Moreover, the poet weaves into his genealogies the story of how Zeus' authority and rulership came about. Zeus not only overcame the tyranny of his father, Cronos, but also fostered good relations with the other gods and attracted followers by rewarding them with honors and privileges and doing good. As a result, Zeus was urged by the assembly of the gods to assume the kingship on Olympus.[14] In short, this is the story of an exemplary leader and patron. Hesiod presents Zeus as the model of a good leader, someone to be imitated by human leaders on earth. And indeed, Zeus and his daughters, the Muses (Hesiod's sponsors) bless the good leader and help him achieve the two qualities of leadership which matter most to the community: persuasiveness in the assembly and justice when resolving conflicts.[15] Again, then, the divine world is construed to reflect human concerns and values.

Hesiod's second poem, *Works and Days (WD)*, offers a series of exhortations to leaders and commoners alike to be just in their actions and judgments. Observing especially the corruption of the elite leaders and their tendency to pass "crooked sentences," Hesiod reflects on the relationship between justice and the prosperity of individual and community. In a series of powerful images and myths, he describes the all-important function of Zeus, the protector of justice, who knows and hears all, blesses the just and punishes the unjust. Dikē, the goddess of Justice and daughter of Zeus,

[13] *Theog.* 886-917.
[14] Ibid., 881-85.
[15] Ibid., 81-93.

> howls when she is dragged about by bribe-devouring men
> whose verdicts are crooked when they sit in judgment...
> She rushes to sit at the feet of Zeus, son of Kronos,
> and she denounces the designs of men who are not just,
> so that the people pay for the reckless deeds and evil plans
> of leaders whose slanted words twist her straight path.[16]

One man's corruption and injustice causes evil and suffering for the entire community: infertility of fields, animals, and women, famine, plague, and the ravages of war.[17] Conversely, "when men issue straight decisions... and do not step at all off the road of rightness, their city flourishes."[18] So by continuing to commit injustice, men continue to harm themselves, their communities and their descendants. As the myth of Prometheus, the champion of humankind, explains, it is man himself who is responsible for the origin and predominance of evil in this world.[19] Yet if this is so, then it is also the human race that is responsible for *improving* the miserable conditions on earth by understanding their causes and acting accordingly.

Unlike Homer, Hesiod distrusts and avoids the town, and above all the market and the assembly place (*agora*) with its quarrels and politics.[20] The small farmer has to work hard to avoid debt and misery and cannot afford to get involved in politics.[21] In fact, Hesiod's advice is to stay away even from the blacksmith's shop, where the lazy crowds gather in cold winter, and focus instead on work, family, farm, and good relations with neighbors.[22] Help yourself and create your own support network; this is the pervasive message of *Works and Days*.

After recounting the myths of Prometheus and Pandora, Hesiod concludes that "… there is no way to escape the designs of Zeus.[23] In the *Theogony*, he draws the same conclusion:

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[16] *WD* 220-1, 259-62.
[17] Ibid., 238-47. Cf. *Iliad* 16.384-92.
[18] Ibid., 235-37. Cf. *Odyssey* 19.109-14.
[19] *Theog.* 521-616; *WD* 47-106.
[20] *WD* 27-32
[21] Ibid., 298-316, 361-64, 393-413.
[22] Ibid., 493-4; 243-51.
[23] Ibid., 106.

> So there is no way to deceive or hide from the mind of Zeus,
> for not even Prometheus…
> escaped the heavy wrath of Zeus.[24]

To ground his conclusions, Hesiod draws his evidence from myth and the epics rather than from empirical observation in real life. Yet the experience of "crooked decisions" by corrupt judges is undoubtedly real enough, however we assess the autobiographical elements in Hesiod's poems. At some point he exclaims, for example, clearly exasperated by such experiences,

> As matters stand, may neither I nor my son
> be just men in this world, because it is a bad thing
> to be just if wrongdoers win the court decisions.
> But I do not *believe* yet that Zeus' wisdom will allow this.[25]

Hesiod can only believe and hope, appeal to the gods and pray. This is an important point, for it is here more than anywhere else that, before the emergence of the philosophers, we find an effort to promote a "transcendental vision" of the divine advocating and enforcing a set of higher morals and values. Yet this is a desperate and weak attempt, and, less than a century later, Greek thought will take a decisive turn in the other direction.

This turn is best exemplified by Solon, the Athenian statesman and lawgiver, who, in 594 BCE, in the midst of a severe social crisis that threatened to erupt in revolution and civil war, was appointed by his fellow citizens mediator with full powers.[26] His own comments on the problems he faced, and the solutions he came up with, are preserved in some of his laws and poetry fragments.[27] A striking feature of his thought is the conviction that there are processes, or consequences, that will occur "with certainty, always" (*pantōs*). For example, in the "Hymn to the Muses", he expresses his desire for prosperity and wealth.[28] Such wealth, however, should be acquired only by just means, for Zeus' punishment follows unjust acts, some times soon afterwards, at other times later, yet always, with certainty—as he emphasizes no less than three times. How is it that

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[24] *Theog.* 613.

[25] Ibid., 270-73; my emphasis.

[26] This crisis is discussed in Meier (1986), 75-77. On Solon, see also Meier (1990), ch.3; Murray (1993), ch.11; and Raaflaub (1996b).

[27] The likelihood is that the poems were to be performed at elite parties (*symposia*) but Solon undoubtedly expressed similar views in public.

[28] Fr. 13 in West (1992).

Solon can be so certain? One clue is in the way in which he refers to natural phenomena. For example, he compares the shattering of human *hybris* by Zeus with the sudden scattering of dark storm clouds by a spring squall. Or, in another poem, he makes a similar comparison in the context of politics: in the same way that dark clouds produce snow or hail, and thunder follows lightning (that is, in the same necessary relation of cause and effect), great men, if given too much power, become tyrants, destroy the city, and enslave the people.[29] Hence, one needs to think carefully before taking political action. It seems then, that, in Solon's thought, divine punishment and human behavior have the same inexorable logic as natural phenomena.

All this helps us understand the main piece of Solon's political thought, a programmatic poem entitled "Eunomia" (or "Good Order"), that was probably composed before Solon was elected mediator.[30] The poem begins with a strong expression of communal identity and asserts that the gods are for, and not against, Athens and must not be blamed for the city's misery. Responsibility rests, rather, with the citizens and, in particular, with the elite whose greed and abuses have been the real causes of the city's suffering.[31] Dikē (the goddess of justice), however, knows what has been happening and will certainly return to impose retribution.[32] The entire city then will be affected (by what Solon describes as an "inescapable wound"): enslavement by a tyrant, revolt *(stasis)* and civil war, the death of young men, conspiracy, poverty, and debt bondage.[33] This is the sort of evil that harms every citizen, even when he tries to hide in the innermost chamber of his home.[34] Knowing all this, Solon urges his fellow-citizens to adopt *eunomia* and abandon *dysnomia* (bad order). The solution to the current crisis lies in the restoration of the traditional "good order".

Solon's thinking goes far beyond Hesiod's. Solon recognizes political processes as cause-effect relations that are comparable to natural processes, or laws, and are located entirely on the political

[29] Fr. 9 in West (1992).
[30] No. 4 in West (1992).
[31] Ibid.,1-13.
[32] Ibid., 14-16.
[33] Ibid., 17-25.
[34] Ibid., 26-29.

level. Abuse of power and offenses against individuals and community inevitably results in socio-political disaster (and not just in the natural disasters envisaged by Homer and Hesiod). Hence Dikē is no longer thought of as Zeus' obedient daughter, who sits at her father's feet and begs him to intervene on her behalf. She now acts independently and appears separately in her own right as the personification, indeed almost as the abstract principle, of Justice.

Moreover, Solon did not draw on myths and epics but on empirical knowledge gained through the observation of many communities around him: abuses by elites resulted in widespread dissatisfaction, civil strife, and, eventually in the usurpation of power by a tyrant. Thus, empirical knowledge replaced belief based on religious trust. In addition, Solon's conclusions were very different from Hesiod's. In Solon's view, since all citizens would suffer from the consequences of political abuses, what was required was not the withdrawal from the political sphere (avoiding the *agora* and fostering good relations with one's neighbors, as Hesiod thought) but, on the contrary, the political involvement of all citizens. The elites, in particular, had a special interest in curbing *hybris* and the abuse of power and imposing limits on themselves, since they too would inevitably be affected by a deteriorating political situation.

It was in the hands of the citizens to determine what kind of order would prevail in the community. The capacity to predict with certainty, a certainty grounded on experience, made it possible to anticipate, plan, and take corrective measures. Solon (and, for that matter, anyone in his position or, in fact, any citizen) thus was empowered to do what was necessary to correct abuses, restore justice, and resolve social conflict. The poet could let his arguments speak for themselves. He did not need to pray, exhort, and beg.

The laws Solon enacted reflect these insights. He took decisive measures to resolve the economic and social crisis that plagued Athens at the time, by canceling debts, abolishing debt bondage, and enacting a series of incisive regulations concerning agriculture, property, and social relations. He introduced measures, which sought to ensure that political responsibility was widely shared among the citizens. His constitutional innovations included a weighted system of political rights that tied influence and office to property, rather than descent. Further, a new council, if indeed created by Solon, was intended to balance the traditional exclusiveness of aristocratic power. Finally, citizen involvement was encouraged by the right of

appeal (presumably in serious cases) to an assembly (called *hēliaia*), "third party (or popular) advocacy" (that is, the right of any citizen to seek redress on behalf of another citizen who had been wronged), and the so-called *stasis* law, which threatened with loss of citizenship those who would not take sides in case of civil strife.

Solon is representative of a political phenomenon that emerged around this time and Christian Meier calls an "autonomous intelligence" or a "third position".[35] He was one of several eminent persons whom a later tradition linked together in the group of the "Seven Sages." They stood above the partisan struggles that threatened to tear their communities apart and drew on a shared pool of ideas and values, when enacting their practical solutions. Some of these persons had ties to the oracle of Apollo in Delphi, yet the solutions they proposed were entirely secular, pragmatic, and directed by political insight and necessities. If they invoked the gods, they did so in order to endow their laws with greater authority and pay respect to the city deities, not to draw on divine wisdom or revelation. The Spartans, for example, claimed that the reforms attributed to their legendary lawgiver Lycurgus (probably enacted no more than half a century before Solon) had been "received" from Apollo. The intention here was also to imbue the reforms with higher authority, not to pretend that they were of divine origin: Lycurgus was no Moses.[36] The sanctuary of Delphi at that time did not serve only as an oracle but also as a depository of knowledge in practical and, even more importantly, in political matters, such as the founding of new colonies. The priests, by being constantly in contact with a vast number of visitors from all over the Greek and the adjacent non-Greek world accumulated a great deal of knowledge and experience and passed this along in form of advice to those who came to ask for it.[37]

Now, even if all this fits the label of "transcendental," its connection with the religious or divine sphere is loose and thin, while its focus is political and pragmatic. The solutions worked out by men like Solon or "Lycurgus", whether they anticipated future developments or reacted to past ones, were always tied to specific problems,

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[35] Meier (1986); and (1990), 42, 44.

[36] On Archaic reforms in Sparta, and on other Archaic lawgivers, see, e.g., Murray (1993), ch.10; Hölkeskamp (1999); Raaflaub (2000), 42-48.

[37] Malkin (1987), ch.1; also (1989); and Meier (1990), 40-45.

and were based on a substantial amount of abstract and systematic thinking. The reforms introduced by Cleisthenes, an Athenian who came about a century after Solon, demonstrate this in an impressive manner, and it is unfortunate that reasons of space do not allow us to pursue this further here.[38] What is essential, for our purposes, is that from Solon onwards the political sphere and its connection with the social sphere were regulated entirely by such rational, pragmatic thinking. By the late sixth century, this helped promote more egalitarian systems in many Greek *poleis*. The basis for this development was the understanding that the political integration of at least the broad class of free farmers (that is, those able to afford the equipment necessary to serve in the heavily armed infantry called *hoplites*) was instrumental in neutralizing destructive elite rivalries and stabilizing the community.[39]

In Athens, due to a set of unique conditions (the victories of the Persian Wars and a new focus on naval power), such egalitarianism was extended to all citizens, regardless of their wealth, descent, education, or skills—that is, far beyond the parameters traditionally acceptable in Greek society. This system, called *dēmokratia*, was remarkably refined and successful in securing the political commitment of enormous numbers of citizens. At its height, according to modern estimates, the involvement of close to half of the 50-60,000 citizens was required in order to operate it. Sophisticated methods were developed to achieve the widest possible distribution of political responsibility and to protect this system against abuses and to prevent failures.[40]

Throughout this period, the Athenians not only continued their traditional religious observances, but also built the most magnificent complex of sanctuaries the Greek world had seen, and added a vast number of festivals and rituals to thank the gods for their support and to ask for continued prosperity and protection. By the late fifth century, several observers commented on the number and lavish nature of Athenian festivals. Yet, surprisingly, it is difficult to establish more than an indirect connection between religion and democracy. As one scholar notes, much of what we would expect to find—such as prayers for democracy, for its salvation or restoration;

[38] Meier (1990), ch.4; Raaflaub (1995); Morris and Raaflaub (1998), chs. 3-5.
[39] Morris (1996); Robinson (1997); Raaflaub (1999), 132-41.
[40] Bleicken (1994); Hansen (1999); Raaflaub (1999), 141-46.

the consultation of oracles on issues of internal politics; or the adaptation of deities, cults, and rituals to specifically democratic, as opposed to "patriotic", needs—is absent from the record.[41] At no point, as far as I know, were either constitutional innovations or incisive political measures connected explicitly with the divine sphere, in whatever form or purpose.

What, then, of the philosophers? In the thinking of the so-called natural philosophers (from Anaximander and Heraclitus in sixth-century Ionia to Anaxagoras in the mid-fifth century) human society, ethics, and politics formed merely a part of the physical world, of the cosmos at large, which they tried to understand through speculation and rational analysis. To be sure, some of them connected nature and politics, for example by applying insights gained in the observation of political processes to the explanation of natural or cosmic processes —as did Anaximander of Miletus with the principles of *isonomia* (equal shares, equal participation), justice, and retribution.[42] Others commented on social and political issues, or formulated ethical precepts—Heraclitus and Democritus come to mind here—while the Pythagoreans applied philosophical insights to constructing an ideal society, though without lasting or widespread success.[43]

Perhaps with the exception of the latter, and taking into account that our knowledge of these early philosophers is sadly fragmentary, it is hard to claim that either they, or the schools they founded, created an encompassing system of ethics and values, or indeed a set of ideas that could be readily applied to, and effect change in human society. Take Parmenides for instance. In terms of rigorous philosophical thinking and the capacity to form and defend an abstract idea, his poem "On Truth" is an impressive achievement, a real breakthrough, and his insights were perhaps based on near-mystical experiences. Yet his focus is strictly limited to ontology and epistemology and to the refutation of false beliefs concerning cos-

[41] Versnel (1995), 370-80. For religious developments in Athens during this period, see Parker (1996); Jameson (1998).

[42] Anaximander no. 12 B1; cf. Alcmaeon no. 24 B4, in Diels and Kranz (1961); Guthrie (1962-81), vol. 1, 72—115, and 341-59. On *isonomia* in this context, see my comments in Ober and Hedrick (1996), 143—45.

[43] On Heraclitus, see Guthrie (1962-81), vol. 1, ch. 7; and Kahn (1979). On Democritus, see Guthrie (1962-81), vol 2, ch. 8; and Farrar (1988), ch. 6. On the Pythagoreans, see Guthrie (1962-81), vol. 1, ch. 4; and Burkert (1962).

mogony. There is not the slightest indication that he was interested in ethics and social issues, or that the "goddess" taught him anything that could be useful to a human community. His philosophy is pure abstract speculation.[44]

In general, the influence of these early philosophers on politics and on political reform was marginal, and some of the evidence that pertains to such interaction is late and of dubious reliability. It is much debated, for example, whether, as Plutarch claims, there was a circle of intellectuals around Pericles, whether Anaxagoras was a member of this circle, and, if he was, whether he had much influence on the politician.[45] Overall, then, even if the thinking of these early philosophers is to be regarded as a form of "transcendental vision," I find it difficult to perceive any "institutionalization" of such a vision, or a measurable, let alone substantial, socio-political impact.

Finally, there remain the sophists, a diverse group of thinkers whose teachings combined many elements and purposes.[46] Although similar to the philosophers in many respects, they focused much more consciously on human society and the socio-political sphere. Perceiving a number of needs, which they offered to meet, they presented themselves as experts, advisors, and teachers, and accepted fees for their services. They were highly critical of traditional views, values, and norms (think, for example, of Protagoras' relativism, as expressed in the *homo mensura* sentence),[47] and this also involved beliefs concerning the divine, even though not all sophists took a strong stand on religious issues. Protagoras, for instance, professed complete ignorance, some of his colleagues indulged in abstract speculation, while Socrates trusted his own *daimonion*. The impact of some radical sophists' ideas and the hostile reactions they sometimes triggered, especially in politically tense situations are illustrated in the *Trial of Socrates* and Aristophanes' *Clouds*, and have many echoes in Euripides.[48]

Take the question of the law, for instance. Based on empirical

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[44] Guthrie (1962-81), vol. 2, 1-80; Fränkel (1973), 349-70. By contrast, Xenophanes emphasizes the usefulness for the community of his knowledge or wisdom (*sophiē*). See 21 B2, in Diels and Kranz (1961); Fränkel (1973), 328-30."

[45] Stadter (1991); Podlecki (1998), ch.3.

[46] Guthrie (1962-81), vol. 3, pt.1; Kerferd (1981); Wallace (1998).

[47] 80 B1, in Diels and Kranz (1961).

[48] On Protagoras, see 80 B4, in Diels and Kranz (1961). On sophists and religion,

observation, the sophists defined the rules regulating life in the *polis* as conventions, or man-made rules (*nomoi*, sg. *nomos*), with limited validity. To these rules, they opposed another type of rules, the laws of nature (*physis*), which could be observed in spheres that were largely unaffected by *nomoi* (i.e. international relations and the animal world), and as such had universal validity and took priority over all man-made rules. The so-called *nomos-physis* debate influenced intellectuals and politicians alike. It prompted some sophists to advocate the right of the strong to rule over the weak—an idea Thucydides applied to Athenian imperialism and, for example, integrated in the "Melian Dialogue"[49]—and to present individual self-realization in tyranny as real justice—an idea refuted with passion by Socrates in the *Gorgias* and the first book of *The Republic*. Others propagated cosmopolitanism and challenged conventional social distinctions such as those between Greeks and barbarians, nobles and commoners, or even free men and slaves.[50] They thus transcended the dividing lines of class and *polis*, and postulated new norms that potentially weakened traditional loyalties. In a famous fragment, Critias (or Euripides) explains even the development of religion as a human response to social problems and categorizes religious beliefs as *nomoi*. [51]

Most sophists offered instruction in rhetoric and other political skills, enabling individuals to succeed in politics. In this sphere, the sophists' political and theoretical thinking was primarily deductive, not normative. It accepted the political reality already in place and aimed at mastering it, not changing it. Unlike Solon, the sophists did not operate from a "third position", and they did not try to change the political culture of the communities in which they lived. In other words, they did not develop an independent position aimed at transcending the political reality they found themselves in, nor did they seek to design norms of political behavior that primarily served communal interests. Questions of ethics were neglected or remained secondary.[52]

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see Kerferd (1981), ch.13; also Parker (1996), ch.10, who offers a discussion of Socrates' trial as well. On Euripides, see Wildberg (2002).

[49] Thucydides: 5.85-111.

[50] Kerferd (1981) ch.12; On *nomos* vs. *physis*, see Kerferd (1981), ch.10.

[51] 88 B25 in Diels and Kranz (1961).

[52] The discussion about Gorgias' teaching of rhetoric in Plato's *Gorgias* is a good

To be sure, some thinkers, including sophists, engaged in efforts to overcome specific political crises by proposing political solutions and compromises, especially in the sphere of constitutional reform. For example, early reflections on a "mixed constitution" can be found in Thucydides' comments on the regime of the Five Thousand, instituted in 411/10 after the fall of the radical oligarchy of the Four Hundred;[53] and suggestions to focus the polity on those "in the middle" are echoed in Euripides' *Suppliants*.[54] Moreover, the concept of an "ancestral constitution," on which moderates among the supporters of both oligarchy and democracy could agree, is emphasized in a fragment of the sophist Thrasymachus and in political proposals made in 411/10. Others, most famously the architect and city planner Hippodamus of Miletus, went so far as to create ideal constitutions from scratch.[55]

All these efforts operated entirely on the human and socio-political level and were driven by empirical observation, pragmatic analysis, and often a remarkable degree of theoretical insight and abstract thinking. Religion was virtually absent from the picture, and ethical considerations were clearly secondary to political ones. It is precisely in response to this kind of thinking that Socrates sought to understand and define a set of essential social and communal values and Plato developed his political philosophy rooted in ethics. And it is here that the beginnings of what can be truly called a "transcendental vision" are to be located, since from this point onwards such "visions" were also connected with efforts to influence social attitudes and political organization—even if their focus remained "this-wordly."

Possible Explanations

So far I have considered ideas and their development in themselves. Trying to explain them would require taking into account the social, economic, and political conditions prevailing during the "Dark

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example. See (for the following paragraph as well) the more detailed analysis in Raaflaub (2001), 99-117.

[53] Thucydides 8.97.2

[54] Euripides, *Suppliants*, 244-45

[55] Thrasymachus, 85 B1 in Diels and Kranz (1961); Aristot. *Ath. Pol.* 29.3; Aristot. *Politics* 1267b22-68a15. See Raaflaub (2001), 110-12.

Age" and the early Archaic period, that is, during the formative centuries of classical Greece. Yet at the moment, our understanding of these conditions is constantly changing. Due to new archaeological findings and new approaches, long-held views are being questioned and re-considered. Nonetheless, there is a basic framework, which seems fairly clear.[56]

As we saw earlier, Archaic thinking, as reflected in the early poets and philosophers, often focused on political issues of great importance for the wellbeing of the community (*polis*). The *polis* is best defined as a community of persons or, more precisely, citizens (a "Bürgerverband"), of place or territory, of cults, customs and laws, that was able to administer itself (fully or partly). Its emergence as the politically and culturally dominant form of community (especially in central and southern Greece, on the Aegean islands, and on the western coast of Anatolia) marks a new beginning, despite some continuities with forms of communal life during the Bronze Age. It developed, probably from about the tenth century BCE, during a time of increasingly rapid change. The Greek world was just beginning to overcome the impact of the "Dark Age", and the Aegean was still in a "power vacuum", outside the control of the eastern empires (that is, Lydia and Persia, which, by the early to mid-sixth century, had established their presence on the Aegean coast of Anatolia). Around the mid-eighth century, when the Greeks started founding new settlements along the coasts of the Mediterranean and the Black Sea, the *polis* was still developing. Despite contact and interaction with the Phoenicians in the Levant and the western Mediterranean, and many Near Eastern influences on Greek culture during the Archaic (or "orientalizing") period, the polis-type of city-state (or rather, citizen-state) is a specifically Greek creation.[57] The *polis* was a perfect response to the Greek topography, where mountainous areas prevail and large plains are rare, and the small plains found along the coasts and the river valleys are often separated from each other by substantial natural barriers. Accordingly, the *polis* was normally rather small, rarely exceeding a few thousand adult male citizens. Further, given the specific conditions of the Greek climate, it was a kind of "open-air" society, where everybody knew everybody else. Neigh-

[56] Snodgrass (1971); (1980); Morris (1997); (1998); see also Osborne (1996).

[57] See Starr (1986); also the chapters by Hansen, Snodgrass, and Raaflaub in Hansen (1993); Donlan (1999); Raaflaub (forthcoming).

boring *poleis* competed for land and other resources, and neighborhood wars were frequent. However, since *poleis* tended to evolve in clusters, differences in size and strength were often balanced through alliances. War soon assumed a strong ritual component, often satisfying pride rather than economic needs.[58]

Within the *polis*, the elite, which was made up of the wealthy landowners, claimed leadership and privileges and sat in the council of elders. However, in the assembly they were joined by the free farmers, whose role was always important, since the community depended for its survival on its citizen army in which numbers, strength, and discipline counted more than wealth and descent. From the beginning, therefore, the *polis* was based on a strong element of equality among the citizens, despite differences in wealth, prestige, and influence. The *polis*, the citizen army, and the political institutions developed together, interacting with one another. A clear line of development leads from the informal system of institutions reflected in Homer's epics to later, more regulated ones, found in mid-seventh century Sparta and Crete, for instance, and from the early sixth century in many other *poleis*.[59]

Early norms of political interaction and early forms of political reflection developed together with the *polis*.[60] Hence, the *polis* itself was probably a decisive factor in the emergence of both a political sphere and the modes of thought that analyzed it. Clearly, though, the question of what made such thinking possible (or even necessary) requires a broader answer grounded in more extensive research. In what follows, I only offer a sketch of some plausible possibilities.[61]

Let us start by drawing a comparison between Greece and its Near Eastern neighbors. Most Near Eastern societies depended for their survival and prosperity on large-scale public projects and the centralized organization of work and defense forces. They required therefore hierarchical structures, which emphasized discipline and obedience, and a strong monarchy, which legitimized its power by

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[58] On the size of the *polis*, see Ruschenbusch (1978), ch.1; On war as ritual, see Connor (1988). On city-state clusters, see Raaflaub (1990).

[59] Raaflaub (1993); (1997b); and (1997c).

[60] See Meier (1990), chs.1-2; Cartledge (2000). On political interaction and reflection, see Hammer (2002); Raaflaub (2000); (2001), section 1.

[61] See the references cited in the previous note; in addition, see esp. Vernant (1982); Meier (1986); (2001). I follow here a line of argument presented earlier, e.g., in Raaflaub (2000), 57-59.

divine support. The king was seen as representative of the gods on earth, while the divine realm (temples, priests) was powerfully present in society. By contrast, Archaic Greek society was almost entirely agrarian, based on family farms, and depended very little on public works.[62] Centralization was unnecessary, and communal enterprises beyond the defense of territory and resources were rare. Moreover, centrifugal tendencies remained strong particularly among the elite. Thus, the *polis* was not dominated by a sacred kingship, and hierarchic structures were weak and subject to constant change. The divine realm as a component of society was remarkably under-developed and non-specialized (for example, priestly functions were held initially by elite families, and later by ordinary citizens, and required no professional training or knowledge). Obedience and subordination were never major virtues. Authority was not unassailable, and criticism and independence were not discouraged. All this helps to explain the "this-wordly" orientation of Greek politics and political thought.

From about the mid-seventh century, wars usually did not threaten the survival of the community. The powers of leadership in the *polis*, therefore, remained weak. The overall leader (*basileus*) was a *primus inter pares*, whose position was based on his personal resources and qualities. Despite differences in wealth, power, and authority, the members of the "proto-aristocratic" class depicted in the epics of Homer and the poems of Hesiod enjoyed basic equality. There was fierce competition among them, and the *basileus* was vulnerable to criticism like everyone else. In fact, in most *poleis*, he soon lost his special status and was absorbed into the ruling elite.

Although the aristocracy that gradually emerged was ambitious, their efforts to set up barriers against the other members of the community failed. Despite their glorious self-presentation, there was only a relatively small gap separating them from the broad class of independent farmers, who played an indispensable role in the army and the assembly. As the members of the elite ultimately depended on them, they had to recognize and respect their sentiments, and they could be criticized and challenged. Furthermore, because of the lack of massive external pressure and the limited role of war, there was no need for a strong, disciplined, and cohesive elite. Typically,

[62] Hanson (1995).

the members of the aristocracy sought to prove their excellence in a different arena, that of athletic competition, which assumed great importance in the Archaic Age. They maintained close relations with their peers from other *poleis* and even non-Greek polities (such as the Lydians), and often they were more loyal to those ties than the ones to their community.[63]

All this happened during a period of rapid social change and frequent social conflict. The *polis* developed into a tight unit, where the communal element was strengthened at the expense of the individual household (*oikos*). Moreover, power and political procedures were formalized and somewhat depersonalized. Colonization, seafaring, and trade offered many opportunities for success and economic gain. However, as social and political mobility increased, so did the pressures on the aristocracy. Social and economic crisis compounded the situation, and there were often violent confrontations between the wealthy landowners and large sections of the smaller landholders tied to them through various forms of dependence. To resolve such crises, the opposing parties often agreed upon a process of mediation by a person, or group of persons, who stood above the parties and was given the power to introduce new legislation (here Solon is but one example).

Institutions, laws, and customs varied greatly among the *poleis*—a fact, which surely triggered reflection on political organization and specific institutional arrangements. At this point, it is important to remember also the role of the colonies, which attracted people from many *poleis*—people, who left their homes for various reasons, including poverty, social unrest, and dissatisfaction with existing conditions. In the colonies, they found many opportunities to get actively involved in the communal affairs—the new communities depended on such involvement for their success—and to experiment with new solutions, which in turn influenced developments in Greece as well. Thus, an increasingly widespread, refined, and highly respected culture of politics and political thinking developed in the Greek world—a culture which eventually found its expression in remarkably complex, radical, and innovative solutions.

These factors, some of which already existed in the late eighth

[63] On athletics, see Morgan (1990); and Golden (1998). Here the comparison with Rome is useful, see Raaflaub (1984), 552-66. On the issue of peers, see Herman (1987).

century, when the Homeric epics were composed, became more pronounced and significant over the next two hundred years. They explain why political reflection and involvement became possible, as well as necessary, not only for the ruling classes but also for a large section of the population. They also explain, at least to some extent, why the divine realm remained relatively weak and undeveloped, and why "transcendental visions," insofar as they evolved at all, focused on human society and politics, or on nature, and always had a strong rational and pragmatic orientation.

Afterthoughts on "Greek Axiality"

According to Jan Assmann, both in Egypt and Israel, significant changes and shifts in values and outlook were occasioned by traumatic experiences at the socio-political level. In Egypt this was the frustration with government failures or aberrant policies of individual pharaohs, while the Israelites as a separate ethnic group felt the need to define themselves in a hostile environment. Yet, while Israel went through an "axial breakthrough", Egypt did not (even though it came close). To explain this, Assmann uses "the distinction between, and the separation of, religion and politics, or state and church," which, he argues, "has to be regarded as one of the most important features of axiality".[64] In his view, what prevented the Egyptians from going through an "axial transformation" was precisely "the inability or the unwillingness […] to draw a clear line between religion and the political. Despite the numerous and significant "relocations" that occurred after the breakdown of the Old Kingdom, pharaonic kingship […] never gave up its claim to represent the divine sphere and to act on earth as a representative of the creator". In Israel, by contrast, this distinction was achieved. According to Assmann, the seamlessness of politics and religion, of "Herrschaft" and "Heil", of the mundane and the transcendental, was broken, when in Israel "a different kind of polity" was formed—a polity, where not only kingship was allowed a limited role but where humans freely consented to enter into an alliance with God and adopted the stipulations of divine law.

So, how does Greece figure in this picture? Assmann, when talk-

[64] For this and the following remarks, see Assmann (this volume).

ing about political theology turning into a critical discourse, distinguishes between the biblical tradition, which is critical of government, and the Greek tradition, which is critical of religion. This is quite true. However, as, in my view, the differences between the two cultures in both religion and government run much deeper than this neat distinction suggests, both their critical traditions and the forms of freedom sustaining these traditions are radically different.

Let us take the example of the relationship between freedom and law. To begin with, as Assmann says, "freedom" is not a biblical concept. Moreover, it is clear that, in Israel, the liberation from pharaonic kingship (that is, from absolute and divinely sanctioned monarchic rule) does not result in absolute liberty. Rather, the new relationship between god and man forged through the Israelites' alliance with god, entails the acceptance of God's laws and exclusive rule. Of course, the Israelites are free to abandon their contract with God. Yet, it is equally true that if they do, they will suffer for it. Israel can prosper only if it accepts and follows the laws of God. Thus, law in Israel is divine law, and freedom of thought and expression, achieved as a principle with the liberation from pharaonic oppression, is *de facto* a freedom that is doubly limited. That is, it is limited to those who speak for this god (the prophets, the priests, and the leaders), and it is also limited to expressing, interpreting, and enforcing their god's will and law. It is only with the publication of the Torah, at a rather late stage in Israel's history, that sacred knowledge becomes accessible to the people, religion is moralized, and morality becomes transcendental.[65]

The Greek concept of law is radically different. When the Greeks—due to their almost miraculous success in warding off Persian conquest in 490 and 480/79 BCE —become aware of freedom as a political value and coin a word for it (*eleutheria*), [66] they do not perceive freedom as absolute either. According to Pindar, "*Nomos* is *basileus* (king) of all, mortals and immortals alike" [67] And in Herodotus, an exiled Spartan king says to Xerxes, the Persian king: "Although they [the Spartans] are free, they are not entirely free; their master (*despotès*) is the law (*nomos*), and they are far more afraid of this than

[65] See Knohl (this volume).
[66] Raaflaub (1985), ch.3.
[67] Fr. 169.1-2, in Snell-Maehler (1975).

your men are of you".[68] As we saw earlier, *nomos* is communal law, distinguished from *physis* (law of nature) and other norms, often referred to as unwritten, Hellenic, panhellenic, or divine law (that is, norms which, although not enacted in the form of *polis* laws, are generally valid among all Greeks, though not necessarily all humans). In the *polis*, the *nomos* is always decreed by the community, even when this power has been delegated to a lawgiver. "This was pleasing to the *polis*", is how an Archaic decree begins, while, in the decrees of the Athenian democracy, the *demos* replaces the *polis* in this formula[69] As Euripides puts it, in democracy, the demos has been made monarch, the *demos* is lord.[70] Thus, if the *nomos* is king and the *polis* is responsible for its *nomos*, then the *polis*, or the *demos*, *qua* community of citizens, are rulers over themselves. No other authority stands above that of the community, and within the community all citizens share responsibility.

As a result, Greek law knows no specialized lawyers. In democratic Athens, every citizen is a potential prosecutor, and every defendant has to defend himself.[71] The people delegate power of office by election or lot to individuals or groups, usually for one year, and through the council, the assembly, and the law courts they closely supervise these officials and control their power. In a similar way, Greek religion knows no specialized, professional priests. As a rule, appointments to religious offices, like appointments to political offices, were made through election or lot. Thus, the notion of freedom that was developed in Greece was very different from that characteristic of Israel. In particular, in democratic Athens, the freedom to think and to express one's opinion, which includes the power to criticize and also propose alternatives, is almost unlimited in the *polis*. Any citizen who wishes to (*ho boulomenos*) is encouraged to speak in the assembly. "Freedom of speech" is a highly developed concept,

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[68] Herodotus 7.104. Although this is a statement made in connection to one specific *polis* and in a very specific context (the exiled king is trying to explain why the Spartans never yield, however great the power attacking them is, but fight to their death), by and large the emphasis placed on the validity of the *nomos* holds for all Greek *poleis*. Cf. Thuc. 2.37.3; Ostwald, 1965. On *nomos*, see Ostwald (1969), esp. 20-54.

[69] See Ehrenberg (1965), 89. On Athens, see Rhodes (1997), pt. 1.

[70] Euripides, *Suppliants* 352-3, 406. On Castoriadis' definition of autonomy, which begins when "society recognizes itself as the source of its norms", cf. Arnason (2001a), 56

[71] See Todd (1993).

understood and exercised in two ways, as "equality of speech" (*isēgoria*) and as the "ability to say all," (*parrhēsia*), and limited only in rare cases.[72] To be sure, Athenian democracy and the liberties it fostered were exceptional. In most Greek *poleis,* government was more restricted (oligarchic), and democratic ideals and policies were viewed with suspicion and disdain—and not only by the elites.[73] Yet, the principles I have outlined are valid for most Greek communities, even if to a more limited degree.

Frustration and dissatisfaction were never lacking in Greece, initially caused by elite rivalries and abuse of power (which, as we saw, prompted Solon's reforms in sixth-century Athens), and later by frequent factional strife (which Thucydides analyzed impressively through the example of the *stasis* on Corcyra).[74] These tensions played a crucial role in the development of *political* thought, yet *philosophical* speculation had other origins.[75] In Greece, state and religion were separate from the beginning—that is, from the beginning of the *polis* in the Dark and Archaic Ages—and the divine, or transcendental, sphere, already weak to start with, was further weakened by philosophers and sophists who emphasized individual and communal responsibility for human affairs.[76] With the possible exception of Apollo's oracle in Delphi during the sixth century, [77] neither popular nor official religion provided value systems or overarching norms. At most, as in the case of Zeus' role as protector of justice, gods were invoked to reinforce communal values.[78] This gap was filled later by philosophy and mystery or salvation religions.

In Greece, the liberation of the mind, the freedom to criticize, speculate, and develop new ideas, originated in an environment that differed importantly from that of other "axial transformations". It is thus better to talk of a radical new beginning in this case, rather than a "breakthrough." Given these differences, moreover, one might

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[72] Raaflaub (1985), 277-83; Wallace (forthcoming); also Finley (1982).
[73] Roberts (1994); Ober (1998).
[74] Thucydides 3.82-3; cf. Price (2001).
[75] Raaflaub (2000), 48-49; and 56.
[76] I should add here that I agree with Murray (1987) who understands the *polis* "as being essentially rational and based on political institutions". For a different view, according to which the polis is "in origin and perhaps also in essence a religious organization", see the discussion in Murray (2000), 241.
[77] N. 38 above.
[78] Lloyd-Jones (1983).

even doubt whether the Greek case fits into a more general pattern of "axiality". Yet, clearly, traits and developments of the kind, that are more or less commonly identified as axial, are characteristic of early Greece as well. I conclude by mentioning a few of these, some of which were already present in the social structures and relations depicted in the Homeric epics.

The crisis and breakdown of a powerful order form the background here. The old ruling class of the Bronze Age states that had based its power on palaces, centralized economies, and far-flung foreign relations, had disappeared. In a fragmented and more isolated world, a new multi-centered system of small, independent, *polis*-type communities emerged through a process that lasted several centuries. The *polis* is certainly based on new subjects (or "bearers", *Träger*). Non-elite citizens, who fight in the army and sit in the assembly, play a crucial role in it, and the *polis* develops as a citizen community. The contours of this type of community are clearly delineated by Homer, both negatively (when he describes the non-polis of the Cyclopes) and positively (when he describes the ideal community of the Phæacians).[79] Irrespective of whether the society depicted in the epics is the poet's own or a slightly earlier one, it is clearly one that is familiar both to the poet and his audiences. This undoubtedly allows for easy identifications, even though the action and the events of the epic are historicized and consciously located in a time of heroes, many generations earlier.[80] The singer-poet's perspective is largely that of the *polis*, where we witness new identities in the making—even on a large scale, when the old story of the *Iliad* is reinterpreted as a panhellenic enterprise directed against a pan-eastern alliance in Troy. This reflects changes in awareness already visible in the eighth century.[81]

Elite families, separated from the commoners only by a small gap at the beginning, developed into aristocracies, in an ongoing process of social and economic differentiation. The tension between their individual aspirations and communal interests shaped the evolution of the *polis* from beginning to end.[82] Elite values and ambitions, as we saw earlier, were open to challenge, and were indeed constantly

[79] Raaflaub (2000) 25-26.
[80] Patzek (1992); Raaflaub (1997a).
[81] Patzek (1992), pt.3.
[82] Starr (1977), ch. 6; Stein-Hölkeskamp (1989).

challenged. Eventually, in the late sixth and fifth century, most traditional views and values became subject to this sort of contestation, which provided an indispensable stimulus for intellectual inquiry and discovery. Yet already in the Homeric epics, the sharp differences between the "world as it should be" and the "world as it really is" are picked up and dramatized, especially concerning the qualities and responsibilities of communal leaders. Far from defending elite ideology, Homer demonstrates a marked ability to stand up to elite aspirations, to criticize their shortcomings and failures (such as those of Agamemnon and Hector in the *Iliad*, and of the suitors in the *Odyssey*), and to suggest resolutions in the interest of communal well-being.[83] The leaders are held accountable; their status and position depend on their success, and their success is determined not least by communal approval. In an ongoing conflict between, what A. H. W. Adkins has termed, "competitive" and "co-operative" excellences, the values and norms of the community, far from being always victorious, acquired a distinct formulation and character. [84] Morality and knowledge, given the absence of "specialized" guardians, were broadly based. In a sense, they were democratized long before the emergence of democracy.

All this should suffice to make my point. Elements of "axiality" are crucial components of Greek civilization. They are present from a very early stage of cultural development and are closely linked to the evolution of the *polis*. Their roots lie in the Dark Ages, in the two centuries or so preceding the composition of the Homeric epics. As Arnason points out, in Greece the process of state formation was uniquely self-limiting, oriented towards a fusion of the state with the political community and a systematic minimization of monopolizing trends. The axial transformations of thought and culture can be analyzed in terms of response and contributions to this development.[85]

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[83] Havelock (1978), esp. chs.7—10; Morris (1986); Raaflaub (1989); (2001), 73-89.

[84] Adkins (1960); (1972).

[85] Arnason (this volume).—Without being able to develop this further here, I suggest that the "axial" characteristics just mentioned offer the possibility to tie Rome into these developmental patterns as well. Rome starts out both as a community with structures closely related to the Greek polis, and as part of a "cluster" of communities similar to those in the Greek world. Rome, though, develops on a different track, under conditions that differ sharply from those in Archaic Greece. Led by a strong and cohesive elite, whose distinct value system is based almost

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entirely on communal service and leadership, Rome emerges, after a long struggle for survival, as an aggressive and imperialist state (Harris (1979); Raaflaub (1996a)). Axial patterns can be seen in this context also (for details, see, e.g., Cornell (1995); Hölkeskamp (1987); Jehne (1995)), that is, within structures formed to enhance the chances for success in a hostile world. Religious, legal, and moral knowledge, long-monopolized by a narrow "patrician" aristocracy, are eventually opened up to broader circles with the publication both of the law (in the *Twelve Tables*) and of the *formulae* required for its correct interpretation. The elite, though long successful in defending its exclusiveness, "incorporates" new families and acquires a much broader base. Fierce competition among these elite families guarantees that those in office are accountable and that power is grounded in the citizen body. The interchange in power constellations ensures openness and prevents individuals from monopolizing power. These features can be seen best in the "middle republic," from the late fourth to the mid-second centuries, when Polybius speaks, anachronistically already at his time, of Rome's ideal "mixed constitution" (6.11-18)—that is, before the "crisis of the republic" which, triggered by the oligarchy's inability to deal with the difficulties of ruling a far-flung empire, brings about civil war, the rise of powerful individuals, and eventually monarchy.

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PART THREE

LATE ANTIQUITY AND BEYOND

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INTRODUCTION: LATE ANTIQUITY AS A SEQUEL AND COUNTERPOINT TO THE AXIAL AGE

JOHANN P. ARNASON, S.N. EISENSTADT AND BJÖRN WITTROCK

References to late antiquity were prominent in early discussions of the Axial Age. It was only through the innovations and achievements of this period that the two most formative Western Eurasian traditions became joint components of global history. The mutual adaptation of Christianity and the Roman Empire fused Greek and Jewish legacies in a new pattern that left its mark on later civilizational formations in the European region; three centuries later, the emergence of Islam as a rival universal religion with imperial ambitions combined another appropriation of the Jewish source with a more limited but still highly significant link to its Greek counterpart. Both perceptions of the original axial background and interpretation of its long-term significance were inevitably shaped by this key historical experience, even when it was not explicitly acknowledged. In particular, it seems likely that the concept of a "secondary breakthrough" first appeared as an attempt to clarify the relationship between late antiquity and its axial ancestors. On the other hand, the rediscovery of late antiquity as a historical epoch with distinctive characteristics and of major importance for later developments is indisputably one of the major results of historical research during the last decades, and its implications for comparative history have yet to be explored in detail. The question of connections, parallels or contrasts with the Axial Age must now be reconsidered in light of this emerging problematic.

It has sometimes been suggested that the interest in late antiquity reflects impressions of similarity between this last phase of the Roman Empire and the lifeworld of its modern historians—often, but not always in the sense of recurring civilizational crisis or decline. But such analogies seem to be older than any substantive notion of

civilizational crisis or decline.[1] Art historians around the turn of the twentieth century (especially Alois Riegl) are now commonly credited with the first view of late antiquity as a separate and original cultural formation; a more complex understanding of the period as "another antiquity, another civilization"[2] began to develop in the 1970s and is now widely accepted. Two main strands of thought seem to have been involved. On the one hand, it became increasingly clear that medieval Europe was neither a direct descendant of classical antiquity nor separated from it by a purely regressive intermezzo; the profile and the legacy of the period in between had to be described in positive terms. On the other hand, a better grasp of the Byzantine world and its distinctive trajectory, as well as of the complicated process which led to the formation of Islam as a new civilization, enabled historians to see the whole "transformation of the Mediterranean world"[3] in a more balanced perspective. The growing consensus on a new framework of periodization did not always translate into agreement on chronology. An intuitively plausible model would define the late antique period as beginning with the restructuring of the Roman Empire in the late third and early fourth centuries CE and coming to an end in the seventh century CE; the *terminus ad quem* is marked by the first wave of Islamic expansion, the onset of a far-reaching transformation of Byzantine culture and society and a series of less precisely datable developments in the West (including the consolidation of barbarian successor kingdoms and the emergence of the papacy as a separate centre). Some historians prefer to go back to the crisis of the late second century. More importantly, it can be argued that the seventh century was only the beginning of the end, and that the civilizational transitions in question were not completed until around 800: with the climax of the Abbasid caliphate, the reconsolidation of the Byzantine Empire after a phase of external threats and internal conflict, and the formation of the Carolingian Empire in the West.

Compared to the Axial Age, the cultural innovations of late an-

[1] See the discussion in Herzog (2002).

[2] Marrou (1977), 13.

[3] See Maier (1968); this book has figured less prominently in the debate on late antiquity than it merited. In the English-speaking world, Peter Brown's widely read essay on late antiquity is commonly regarded as a landmark, and A. H. M. Jones' massive study of the late Roman Empire as the most important background work.

tiquity are more closely and visibly linked to structural changes and geopolitics within a clearly delimited framework: the Mediterranean and its adjacent areas. The transformation of the Roman Empire, beginning with Diocletian's reforms and culminating in its Christianization, is obviously central to the history of the period. The Christian Empire as an institution, a vision and an incipient tradition is the most conspicuously characteristic aspect of late antiquity. But the history of the reorganized and recentred empire unfolded in a broader geopolitical context, involving barbarian neighbours along the northern frontier, a rival imperial power in the East (the rise of Sassanid Persia and its internal transformations should be seen as an integral part of late antique history) and incursions of tribal empire builders from the Eurasian steppe. Historians now seem more inclined to think that changes to the balance between the steppe and the sedentary zone, exemplified by the rise of the Hunnic Empire, were crucial to the course of events. Finally, the outcome of changes due to internal and external factors was a new civilizational constellation. The composite civilization of the late Roman Empire was replaced by three successor civilizations: Byzantine, Islamic and Western Christian. The relationship to the late antique background varied from case to case, and the last-named pattern took much longer to mature than the others, but this tripartite configuration was decisive for the subsequent history of Western Eurasia.

The three successor civilizations crystallized around universal religions which took shape in the context outlined above. Christianity entered into a symbiotic relationship with imperial power at the beginning of late antiquity, and different versions of that connection were central to the two civilizational formations that maintained religious continuity; Islam emerged at the end of the period as a more intimate union of creed and empire, and although the original pattern was not perpetuated, it seems more justified to speak of civilizational unity within the Islamic world than across the dividing line between the two Christian ones. In both cases, monotheistic universalism was conducive to expansion beyond existing civilizational borders, with ambiguous results, yet more evidence of civilizational pluralism on the Christian side. The late antique ascendancy of universal religions (it was only through the imperial connection that Christianity could fully assert itself as such) stands out in contrast to the South Asian pattern: although the trajectory of Buddhism as a universal religion is long and complex, with key

episodes roughly contemporaneous with western Eurasian counterparts, early and important developments in that direction seem to have taken place during the Axial Age (as conventionally defined) or in its aftermath, and they were followed by a short-lived but highly important alliance with imperial power in the third century BCE.

A third universal religion of late antique origin, capable of wide diffusion but unsuccessful in the long run and never translated into civilizational patterns, should be set alongside the two triumphant ones. Manichaeism is, for obvious reasons, much less well known than Christianity and Islam, but as recent work on sources discovered during the twentieth century has shown, it merits more comparative study. Although the details of the case are controversial, it was clearly linked to the broader and more diffuse movement known as Gnosticism. A classic analysis of the latter saw it as the interpretive key par excellence to a "late antique spirit";[4] this thesis was undoubtedly a landmark on the road to full recognition of late antiquity as a formative phase, but the idea of a distinct and definable Gnostic religion has proved vulnerable to criticism. The present state of the debate suggests more fluid contours: "Gnosticism" may be a convenient label for an incipient world religion which in the end did not—apart from the failed Manichaean alternative—develop beyond heretical counter-interpretations of established religions (Judaism, Christianity and perhaps Islam), or a misleading amalgamation of a whole cluster of religious movements that have yet to be analyzed and compared in detail.[5] In any case, Gnostic currents had a significant—albeit elusive—impact on religious and cultural developments in monotheistic civilizations. And in the context of debates on axiality, it is worth noting that the Gnostic phenomenon—defined in the broad sense that includes Manichaeism—was particularly closely associated with Egypt and Mesopotamia: the two archaic civilizational centres that had not undergone axial transformations.

The papers in this section deal with three world religions, all linked to the world of late antiquity, but in different ways and with very different long-term historical destinies. Christianity had developed as a religious counterculture within the Roman Empire, and its mutually transformative alliance with the imperial centre marked the

[4] Jonas (1934, 1964).
[5] The latter position is defended by Williams (1999).

definitive shift from classical to late antiquity. The Christian redefinition of relations between religion, state and society is central to the culture of the period, and it called for a reinterpretation of religious history. Although this new pattern was finalized and institutionalized after the Constantinian turn, crucial steps had been taken during the preceding phase. Guy G. Stroumsa analyzes the thought and legacy of a key pre-Constantinian figure, Clement of Alexandria, whose work represents a landmark in the history of Christian encounters with the classical world. Drawing on Jan Assmann's analyses of cultural memory, Stroumsa shows that Clement played a key role in a development which came to full fruition after the Constantinian revolution: he set out to endow Christianity—which was still a religion in search of a culture—with a distinctive and comprehensive cultural memory. A religion which had detached itself from all existing ethnic, cultural and political communities, on the basis of faith in a new and uniquely universal revelation, could not identify with any past history; but it was by the same token capable of developing a universal history of multiple cultures on the road to revelation. Clement's achievement was to adapt Christian understanding of Hebrew, Greek and barbarian religions to this purpose. After the triumph of Christianity within the Empire, the resultant integrated vision of the past could serve a twofold purpose: to defend the claim to a revealed truth transcending all worldly concerns, including political ones, and to justify the exclusive status of a religion that had become a defining part of imperial rule. In this way, the acquired cultural memory helped to perpetuate an ambivalent relationship between religion and political power.

David Levy's paper on Manichaeism, reprinted from an earlier publication, discusses a late antique world religion whose claims to final and all-encompassing truth were no less emphatic than those of Christianity or Islam; but although it spread across the Old World ecumene and survived for more than a millennium, it is—as Levy notes—the only world religion to have been persecuted out of existence. As a result, later interpretations have had to rely on fragmentary sources and tended to underestimate the originality of the Manichaean world-view. For a more adequate understanding of its distinctive features, the Mesopotamian background is of some importance: different civilizational and religious currents had converged in this region and given rise to intensive search for new directions. Mani sublimated this cross-traditional starting-point into an

"ecumenic commitment to universal religious enlightenment" and a message that claimed to represent the inner truth of earlier prophecies. Zoroaster, Buddha and Jesus were seen as forerunners of Mani's mission. More than any other religious vision or doctrine of the period, Manichaeism thus aspired to synthesize and transcend several different axial traditions. The teachings that articulated this ambition were enshrined in writings of the founder; revelation and scripture were thus more closely linked than in other world religions. But the ecumenic and integrative effort took a very specific turn. Eschatology overshadowed all other concerns; a radical dualism (probably more immune to monotheistic connotations than in any other case) reinforced the ideas of struggle and ultimate redemption; finally, the revealed message was expressed in strongly mythological language—more systematically so than in the traditions which the Manichaean Church proposed to replace. This combination of artificially revived mythology and a claim to superior religious truth has made it more difficult to situate Manichaeism in the context of a global history of religions.

The first wave of Islamic expansion is—as suggested above—the most obvious sign of a transition from late antiquity to a new and more divided world. But the formation of Islamic civilization, through a transformation of late antique legacies on the Roman as well as the Persian side, was a complex and protracted process; earlier notions of an instant cultural crystallization, external to the main civilizational centres and imposed by conquest, have been abandoned. Recent scholarship has thrown new light on various aspects of developments after the first conquests. Jan Retsö's paper explores some less familiar connections between the late antique background and the rise of Islam as a last claimant to the axial heritage. On the one hand, the Islamic movement was not only animated by a new version of monotheism; it also linked up with a whole range of eschatological ideas and more or less explicitly revolutionary ideologies that had drawn on axial sources and taken more concrete shape during the Hellenistic period. Retsö suggests that the Islamic onslaught on the established powers of the Near East may be seen as the greatest attempt to implement an axial vision of redemption through a radical break with the past. On the other hand, the South Arabian sources now seem more important than most historians of Islam have been willing to admit. The last Yemeni state with imperial ambitions—the Himyarite kingdom—was drawn into the struggle

between Rome and Iran, and this experience gave rise to a distinctive Yemeni eschatology that appears to have been a major driving force in the earliest Islamic conquests.

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CULTURAL MEMORY IN EARLY CHRISTIANITY: CLEMENT OF ALEXANDRIA AND THE HISTORY OF RELIGIONS

GUY G. STROUMSA

I

When Karl Jaspers launched the concept of *Achsenzeit*, he could not possibly have imagined how fruitful it would become, from a heuristic point of view. For more than half a century, scholars from different backgrounds have often returned to the puzzling synchronism highlighted by Jaspers, in various Mediterranean, Near Eastern, and Asian civilizations around the middle of the first millennium BCE. As a German humanist musing about the origins of civilization at a time when Western civilization appeared to be at its nadir, Jaspers identified correctly something of great importance: that enormously different civilizations had passed from one level of self-consciousness and reflexivity to another more or less simultaneously. A succession of studies, many of them from a comparative viewpoint, have sought to analyze and interpret the remarkable qualitative jump from archaic, highly traditional cultures, to the more critical intellectual and religious development of the classical period. These studies have done much to render explicit what Jaspers could only have suggested.

Yet, the very success of the concept of *Achsenzeit* harbored a real danger. It could make this mutation appear as the most significant one in a neo-teleological vision of world cultural history. After all, there had been other profound social, cultural, and religious transformations, or mutations, in numerous geographic contexts. There is one difference though. Often these changes were not synchronic. "Renaissances" and revolutions do not happen everywhere at the same time. Students of late antiquity have been aware for some time, and have begun to convince scholars working on other periods as

well, that some dramatic changes occurred in the civilizations of the Mediterranean and the Near East under the Roman, Early Byzantine, and Sasanian Empires—or, if one wants to refer more directly to the religious nature of some of these transformations, from the time of Jesus to that of Muhammad.

Various strategies have been devised in order to integrate, as it were, the transformations taking place during late antiquity with those of the "original" Axial Age. Scholars have spoken, for instance, of "axial trajectories," and of "primary" versus "secondary" breakthroughs. The obvious methodological drawback of such terms is their implicit hierarchy: the transformation asserted to be first in time (a highly problematic assertion in itself) would also be higher in value.

Under the Roman Empire, identities changed, sometimes dramatically. Parameters of identity, which had originally been essentially cultural, gradually came to emphasize religious identity, while the very notion, function and perception of religion seemed to be changing fast. Indeed, a typical characteristic of religions in late antiquity is their radical re-interpretation of traditional religious thought and behavior. This was achieved, especially, through an impressive textualist movement, which cut across linguistic, cultural, and religious borders. New sacred texts, as well as a whole series of commentaries and other hermeneutical writings ("religious," historical, and legal) began to circulate. More and more, religious communities developed around new scholarly elites. These new elites were replacing the old priestly classes, which had been in charge of now often obsolete rituals, such as sacrifices. It is precisely in this period, and in particular among the Christians, that the codex, the new, revolutionary form of the book, appeared, replacing the roll from the first to the fourth century.[1] There is no reason to dispute the view of those historians of the book who consider this transformation even more important than Gutenberg's invention of the printing press. The dramatic transformation of the written word, its form, and its function, permitted in late antiquity (and not before) the emergence of world religions—that is, religions whose stated goal, and whose methods, entailed conversion on a large scale, across linguistic, cultural, and political borders. What Wilfred Cantwell Smith has called "the Age of Scripture" was also "the Age of World

[1] See Stroumsa (2003).

Religions," from Christianity to Islam, Buddhism and Manichaeism.

These mutations concerning the understanding of religion and its relationship to traditional cultures and political structures were felt, in a particularly powerful way, during the early growth of Christianity—a religion, that is, which for the first few centuries of its existence remained in search of a culture. To a large extent, Christianity had rejected (or dramatically reinterpreted) the Hebrew culture from which it stemmed, while it remained for a long time unable to accept Greco-Roman culture (given the latter's attachment to polytheism) without drastic amendments. What follows seeks to analyze this complex attitude of early Christianity towards culture by focusing on Clement of Alexandria, a leading early Christian thinker. Central to it is the question of whether or not the concept of "cultural memory" is helpful in our attempt to understand better the dialectical relationship of Christianity to the past, and hence to the religious achievements of the *Achsenzeit*.

II

In the ancient world, becoming a Jew or a Christian meant accepting a new history, namely, the *historia sacra* established through the Scriptures.[2] Conversion to Judaism or Christianity, thus, also meant acquiring a new cultural memory. The transformation of cultural memory, which was apparently, though only apparently, a "side" effect of (religious) conversion, has not received all the attention it deserves.

"Cultural memory" is a concept developed between the two world wars by the Jewish German art historian, Aby Warburg. It is closely connected to that of "collective memory," coined at approximately the same time by the French sociologist Maurice Halbwachs.[3] In their cultural memory, societies sort out from their past what they want to preserve, by what means they want to preserve it, and what status they want to give to this constantly re-fashioned past. Quite clearly, the act of preservation involves also an act of negation. When keeping certain elements from their past, societies decide, through

[2] See, for instance, Momigliano (1975).

[3] Halbwachs (1950). This work was written before the war; Halbwachs was murdered by the Nazis at Buchenwald.

a series of complex mechanisms, and following different patterns in each case, what they also want to forget, either by actively obliterating it, or by simply letting it slip into oblivion. The concept of cultural memory, which originates in a metaphorical use of the biological, individual phenomenon of memory, is very useful for understanding cultural transmission and transformation. It should however be used with care, and one should call attention to the danger of anthropomorphism presented by this sort of metaphorical thinking. A society is not a *macranthropos*, and the patterns and mechanisms through which it evolves may not have much to do with human life.[4]

Some years ago, the Egyptologist Jan Assmann devoted a sustained effort to the question of cultural memory and its modes of functioning in ancient societies.[5] In *Das kulturelle Gedächtnis*, Assmann offered a systematic analysis of the concept, supplemented by three case studies. In the ancient world, the conservation methods (first and foremost, committing to writing) were mainly developed and used by intellectual, religious, and political elites, and Assmann's work sought to examine the significantly different ways in which these elites functioned. In his book, Assmann dealt with societies from the second and first millennium BCE—that is, dating from both before (Egypt) and around (Israel and Greece) the dramatic structural transformations most clearly manifested around the middle of the first millennium BCE, i.e. precisely the era called "the Axial Age" (*Achsenzeit*) by Karl Jaspers.[6]

Following in Assmann's footsteps, one can ask what happened later, at the time of the Roman Empire. Pursuing this line of enquiry could shed some new light upon the transformations of cultural memory in the ancient world. Here, we must remember a fact that our perspective tends to distort. From a chronological point of view, late antiquity was very late indeed: Proclus and Augustine were as far from Plato and Isaiah respectively, as Marcilio Ficino was from Proclus, and Luther from Augustine. A very long and multifaceted past cast its shadow upon the Roman Empire. Under the cumulative weight of the past, cultural identities (both constantly in flux and

[4] See in particular Cancik and Mohr (1988).

[5] Assmann, (1992).

[6] For an analysis of Jaspers' concept from a comparative perspective, see Eisenstadt (1986).

in constant contact with one another) reached previously unknown levels of complexity. The new patterns of thought and behavior developed then are often referred to as cultural and religious syncretism. As the New Testament scholar Gerd Theissen rightly summed up the new conception of cultural memory under the early Empire: "es wird pluralistisch."[7] The "free market" of religions and philosophies, the competing worldviews, the birth of book religions, such as Manichaeism or Mandaeism, and the growth and hegemony of Christianity, were all phenomena of late antiquity. Patterns of thought and behavior were submitted to radical transformations, throughout the Mediterranean and the Near East. As Averil Cameron notes, "the sheer energy of late antiquity was breathtaking".[8]

In the Greek and Roman worlds, the construction of collective memory usually remained the domain of historians, and historiography is the first place to look when one searches for its representations. However, early Christian historiography is strikingly different from ancient Greek and Latin historiography in almost every respect: in its form, its questions, its assumptions and achievements. This important fact, recently noticed by Hubert Cancik, seems to remain almost universally ignored.[9] Moreover, the huge difference, in both content, approach, and style, between pagan and Christian historiography, seems to stem from the sheer presence of the Bible: for the Christians, as for the Jews, the Bible includes all essential history. In ancient Israel, the status of memory was fundamentally different from its status in Greek and Roman society. As Arnaldo Momigliano once remarked, Israel was the only people in antiquity for which memory was a religious duty.[10] In post-biblical times, memory became an essential element in the formation of Jewish identity and consciousness. The development of a specifically Christian reflection on memory is an obvious continuation—and a reworking—of this attitude. Even the Christian *anamnēsis*, the cultic remembrance of Christ's sacrifice, represents a transformation of Hebrew patterns of religious memory, present also in Jewish cultic practices.[11] The new Christian historiography grounds itself on the Bible as inspirational

[7] Theissen (1988), esp. 184.
[8] In Bowersock, Brown, and Grabar (1999).
[9] Cancik (1995).
[10] Momigliano (1966); see 195.
[11] Basset (1988).

narrative. For the Christians of late antiquity, as for the Jews of the same time, memory is essentially religious rather than historical in the usual sense of the word. The rest, being outside the *Heilsgeschichte*, is of no consequence, or *adiaphoros*, to use a Stoic concept. In Averil Cameron's words, "historical time, that is, linear time, was by and large transformed into religious time".[12] Hence we can explain the strong development of new mythical visions of time, both in Rabbinic Judaism and in Patristic Christianity. For the Christians, then, as for the Jews, it may not be an exaggeration to say that religious history is not a mere part of history. The reverse rather is true. Political, cultural, and social history is part of religious history, that is, part of God's revelation. In a sense, then, our aim here is to try to understand better how early Christian intellectuals, those we call the Church Fathers, defined the complex Christian attitude to the past.[13]

Oddly enough, the early Christian conception of cultural memory seems to have never been analyzed. Christianity first grew, mainly, under the Roman Empire, although the new faith reached further South and East, from Ethiopia to Armenia and the Sasanian Empire. Christianity was a *novum* in the ancient world, a religion that found it hard to argue convincingly that it had historical roots of its own in a well-defined and obvious past. It thus assimilated the past of others: first of the Hebrews and the Greeks, then also of the "barbarians" (that is, the other peoples with which the Christians in the Roman world were in some kind of contact). From the start, Christianity identified itself as a world religion, since it offered to everyone, everywhere (and in every language) the same salvation. Its attitude to the past reflects this ecumenical character. In parallel to God's revelation to Moses and the prophets, early Christian thinkers developed, in various but related ways, ideas about the natural history of religion. These ideas sought to explain how that part of humanity (the great majority), which had not been exposed to Biblical revelation, could nonetheless have received, however faintly, the divine light, in what could be perceived as a progressive revelation in history.

Among early Christian thinkers, we can observe the birth and development of a new kind of cultural memory. As Christians, these

[12] Cameron, (1999), 12.
[13] See Mortley (1980); also Kinzig (1994).

thinkers considered themselves the direct spiritual heirs of the Jews. To a certain extent, however, they also sought to reinterpret central elements of Greek culture: mainly philosophy, sometimes also literature—although not of course, Greek religion and mythology. Very soon, Christian missionaries reached out beyond the borders of the Empire, emphasizing the ecumenical dimension of Christianity. The "barbarians," mainly the peoples of the East that for a long time had attracted the attention of the Greeks, such as Egyptians, Phoenicians, Persians, Indians, were also brought into the picture. In a sense, the early Christian thinkers had to recapture the cultural memory of the different civilizations of the known world. This interest in various cultures, however, was not enough to encourage respect for cultural diversity and permit the development of a real anthropological curiosity.[14] Indeed, the teleology inherent to the Christian perception dictated that in approaching these cultures, the religious (i.e. polytheistic) element, which was the main point of focus for the Christian thinkers, was rejected outright, while other dimensions of culture always remained secondary.

III

In order to grasp the development of an early Christian cultural memory, i.e., the relationship of Christianity to its pre-Christian past, we must realize that with Christianity the presence of religion in the societies of the ancient world took a new form. The religious revolution under the Roman Empire mentioned earlier was directly reflected in the public and political dimensions of religion.[15] In particular, both the ancient Greco-Roman conception of "civil religion" (which concerned the place of religion in the city and its role as a state religion), and the Jewish conception of an "ethnic religion" centered upon one Temple, were rejected and reconstructed in various early Christian texts. Although there were important continuities, the ancient conceptions underwent serious changes because of the profound differences between polytheistic and monotheistic religions. It would be a serious methodological mistake, however, to overemphasize the difference between polytheism and monothe-

[14] See Stroumsa (1999), 57—84.
[15] See Stroumsa (1999), esp. 1—56.

ism (or dualism, which is structurally a variant of monotheism) as the main dividing line between the various *conceptions* of civil religion. Early Christianity permitted and encouraged the development of quite new conceptions of the very idea of religion. It is this new perception of religion, emerging in late antiquity, which is at the root of the modern idea of civil religion. Moreover, the novel understanding of religion should be understood in connection with the Jewish background of early Christianity.

As a religion of the ancient Mediterranean and the Near East, Israelite religion shared many patterns and perceptions with other ancient religions (and the same holds also for Samaritan religion). The Temple cult, the centrality of Zion, and the patterns of religious authority developed by the "Aaronides" can be easily compared with other contemporary phenomena. Religion was embedded in politics, to the extent that Martin Buber was able to speak of "theo-politics" in ancient Israel.[16] During the Hellenistic period, however, various groups accepted the prophets' insistence on the chasm between the individual sense of religious duty and royal or priestly authority. In particular, the birth and growth of the Pharisaic movement permitted the development of a new sensitivity concerning the subjective dimension of religious life and to the otherworldly dimension of religious beliefs. With the new insistence on the belief in resurrection, Judaism became a religion of personal salvation, in which purification became moral as much as cultic, and the collective dimension of religion was no longer exclusive or predominant.

From the Hellenistic times onwards, a complex situation emerged in Judaism, due mainly to the Pharisaic movement, but also to the Apocalyptic trends which accentuated the deep divide between religion and politics. A new reflection on the public dimension of religion emerged in Hellenistic Judaism, traces of which we find in both Philo's and Josephus' writings. Moses was compared to the ancient legislators—Lycurgus and Numa in particular. This new perception of Moses, however, required a substantial re-adaptation of his traditional image, since ancient Judaism possessed a concept of revelation foreign to Greek and Roman religions. Whereas in Greco-Roman thought, Lycurgus and Numa were perceived as

[16] See Buber (1932), esp. 139-182.

political leaders who used religion to strengthen the social fabric of their societies and foster peace, for Hellenistic Jewish thinkers Moses was above all a prophet, who attributed to God the ultimate power in the society he had established. Following Assmann's analysis of the "Mosaic distinction", one can say that Moses (or rather the figure of Moses as preserved in Jewish historical consciousness) inverts the relationship between state and religion, which was common in the ancient world.[17]

Philo's political theory, in particular, focuses upon the Law of Moses.[18] Philo's conception of *nomos* reflects its double dimension, as both religious and political. It would be left to Josephus to invent the term *theokrateia*—an *hapax* that occurs in *Contra Apionem* (II. 155 ff).[19] The definition of religion presented there is strikingly different from, say, Livy's. While Josephus insists that Moses' role was that of presenting religion, i.e., truth, as a teaching suitable for all, Livy depicts Numa Pompilius as someone who had to inculcate the fear of heaven in the uncouth (*rudem)* Roman populace.[20] For Livy, the establishment of the *sacra* and the role of the priests had little to do with truth. They were only meant to induce piety and reduce violence. It is significant that fictional, "marvellous" stories, such as Numa's nightly meeting with the goddess Egeria, were needed by Livy in order to justify Numa's achievements. In addition, it is important to note here that in order to suit monotheistic conceptions of religious truth, for which the leader was above all a prophet and a holy man, the figures of the great "pagan" legislators were stripped of most of the ethnic and municipal associations they had in both Christian and Jewish sources.

It is within the frame of Hellenistic Judaism that the Hebrew concept of *berith* came to be perceived as parallel to the Greek *politeuma.* Such a parallel, though, could—and in time it also would—lead to a two-pronged development. On the one hand, it permitted the politicization of the religious community, while on the other, it encouraged the "disengagement" of the religious community from society, from the "*polis*", which is precisely what happened under

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[17] See Assmann (1997).

[18] See Wolfson (1947), 322-441.

[19] On the concept of *theokrateia* in Josephus, see Amir (1985-86); Gerber, (1997) 338-359; Cancik (1987). On the concept itself, see further Lang (2002).

[20] Livy, *History*, I. 9-21. On the perception of Numa in Western historiography and consciousness, see in particular Silk (forthcoming).

the Roman Empire both among Jews and Christians. Like the early Church Fathers, the Rabbis created a spiritual and intellectual "enclave" within the surrounding pagan society. This enclave remained marginal to society at large, belonging to it in some ways, while retaining its distance from it in others.

Later echoes of the early Jewish traditions in Rabbinic and Talmudic literature are of particular interest to our theme, as they reflect what happens to the political dimensions of religion after the disappearance of the state and the destruction of the Temple. As is well known, Judaism reconstructed itself upon new bases in the last decades of the first century CE.

Christianity in general—and Western Christianity in particular, most clearly under Augustine's influence—questioned the assumption, shared by all ancient Mediterranean societies, that religion was inherently connected to the well-being of the state. Indeed, it was profoundly ambivalent about human government. Even the Christianized Roman Empire remained the site of this-worldly evil, and hence profoundly different from the City of God to which Christians aspired. In contrast to Greco-Roman thought, for Christian thinkers religion did not possess a socio-political dimension by definition. Indeed, the status of Christianity as a *religio illicita* in the first three centuries had encouraged the view that salvation was fundamentally incompatible with political success. To be sure, the imperial theology represented so well by Eusebius of Caesarea in the early fourth century tried to reverse the pattern, but this attempt was short lived. By and large, Christian thinkers resisted the idea of a "political theology," as was convincingly argued by Erik Peterson in his seminal *Monotheismus als politisches Problem*.[21] Peterson sought to understand the decline and final demise of political theology in Christian thought after the fourth century. As an anti-Nazi theologian (in clear opposition to Carl Schmitt, the legal scholar and Nazi sympathizer, who had introduced the term *politische Theologie*), it was important for Peterson to show that classical Christianity made no real claims to political power. In order to do so, Peterson followed the history of the concept of *monarcheia* from Pseudo Aristotle's *De mundo*, through Philo, to the statements of Eusebius and Augustine on di-

[21] Peterson (1935). See Schindler (1978), where it is shown that the issue was more complex than claimed by Peterson. Similarly, Momigliano (1987) has argued that Peterson's thesis ought to be amended.

vine and human monarchy. While Peterson's thesis is often cited, it would seem that the discussion on this issue deserves to be reopened.

During the last stages of Second Commonwealth Judaism, the new religious sensitivity had permitted a strong turn inwards and the transformation of Judaism into a religion of salvation. This trend is reflected, for instance, in the evangelical saying of Jesus: "Render to Caesar what belongs to Caesar, and to God what belongs to God" (Mat. 22: 21 and parallels). The same trend would eventually give birth to Paul's dramatic internalization of religion and indifference towards the political dimensions of religion. This strong tension between the realms of religious and political authority, at the very birth of Christianity, will retain its powerful influence throughout Christian history, and will be reflected in the constant ambivalence toward political power. This ambivalence, which is central to Christianity, is at the core of the political dualism of the Middle Ages studied by Ernst Kantorowitz with respect to the West, and, more recently, by Gilbert Dagron with respect to Byzantium.[22]

Under the Roman Empire, the boundaries of religious, ethnic, and cultural identity were drastically redrawn. More and more, the central aspect of identity (both collective and personal) became religious, until this was finally "consecrated" in imperial legislation from the end of the fourth century on, especially in laws enacted by Emperor Theodosius. At that point, that is, after the Constantinian revolution, Christianity had come full circle to establish itself as a religion with clearly political contours. Nonetheless, its status in the Christianized Roman Empire, remained strikingly different from the status of religion in the ancient city, or in ancient Rome.

The exclusiveness of the state religion, and the condemnation of all other forms of religion, was something quite new, with no equivalent in the pagan world. This was not only connected to the monotheistic character of Christianity, but also to the new Christian conception of religion. Religious life was now internalized as never before, whereas the political sphere was conspicuously absent (what Max Weber, and Hans Kippenberg in his wake, have called *Entpolitisierung*).[23]

However, as a result of these changes, when religion re-enters the political sphere, it cannot avoid a certain radicalization. More pre-

[22] Kantorowitz (1957); Dagron (1996).
[23] See Kippenberg (1991).

cisely, a clear dualism of the *corpus ecclesiae* and the *corpus respublicae* had developed in early Christianity. It is only after the radical dissociation of religion from the political realm that the idea of civil religion, as opposed to "real," internalized, personal religion, as we know it in the modern Western tradition, could have developed. To give just one instance of this problem: in his *De Civitate Dei*, by far the most important work dealing with our topic, Augustine points out that while Seneca was wise enough to reject idols as false (in his lost work, *De superstitione*), he nonetheless accepted the city's cult (although it was based on idols), since for him observing the rites meant following the laws, rather pleasing the Divinity.[24]

Although Rabbinic Judaism, like Patristic Christianity, also attested to a similar dissociation, the formal structures of ancient Judaism (which embodied a union of religion and politics), such as the Temple sacrifices, were never officially declared null among the Jews, but only temporarily suspended. For the Christians, on the other hand, these structures had undergone a radical change, which permitted the modern idea of civil religion to emerge, with Machiavelli and Rousseau.

The concept of civil religion—as well as that of political theology, i.e., the intellectual justification of civil religion—should thus be seen in a double perspective. It was a concept first embedded in Greek and Roman thought and practice, which was then transformed from a political reality into an ideological construct through its adaptation to the Jewish and Christian cultures.

Such a perspective sheds some new light upon the often recognized, but rarely explained Christian distinction between the sacred and the secular, a distinction born, as Robert Markus reminds us, in late antiquity.[25] Moreover, it offers a fresh, comparative, approach to the understanding of the dialectical relationships between religion and politics in the ancient world.

IV

While Christianity proved unable to accept the idea of a universal state, it had no problem with the idea of universal history. Mono-

[24] Augustine, *City of God*, VI.10.
[25] Markus (1990), 7-13.

theism might not directly lead to a single Emperor, but it certainly fit the idea of a unified history of humankind. It is this (Biblical) insistence upon the essential unity of humankind that permitted the development of a new conception of cultural memory, inclusive, at least in theory, of all ethnic identities and cultural traditions of humankind. If men and women were Christians by nature, as Tertullian had said (*anima naturaliter Christiana*), the cultural memory of Christianity could naturally reflect about the whole past of humankind. Moses could be compared to the most famous among the political and spiritual leaders in different cultures, and could easily be claimed to be the best among them. Clement of Alexandria, in particular, shows a rather original (and quite unexpected) approach to cultural memory. I should like now to evaluate some of its aspects.

As a thinker, Clement of Alexandria does not compare with his follower Origen, a man of much greater theological genius. Although Clement's orthodoxy was never questioned (whereas Origen's heretical views became soon identified as heretical and the object of violent controversies), Origen was to leave his imprint on Christian thought in a much more significant way than his predecessor. Yet, the very fact that Clement, a Greek intellectual, was a convert to Christianity (whereas Origen was an insider, who had grown up as a Christian, and a martyr's son) permitted Clement to ponder the relationships between cultures and religions in a highly original, and all too often underestimated, way. Like other converts and apologists in the second century, Clement seeks to present Christianity as an intellectually respectable school of thought. This often leads him into some rather shallow digressions, where he shows off his knowledge of Greek literature. And yet, it is precisely this lack of theological and philosophical sophistication that permits Clement to develop what I consider to be a quite new conception of cultural memory. Here, we need to remember that Clement's own cultural memory is that of an Alexandrian intellectual. When he converts, rather than shedding it off together with his old religion, he goes back to it and uses it as a resource. He sees Christianity as a religion of a new kind, which gave up the ethnic (and cultural) dimension usually connected to the various religions. In this way, cultural memory is given the ecumenical dimensions of the new religion itself, encompassing all mankind. It is no exaggeration to speak of the explosion of cultural memory in early Christianity. Becoming a Christian thus involves a new kind of conversion, utterly different

from that to Judaism, which cuts through the traditional ethnic and cultural categories of the ancient world.

In other words, Clement does not develop a theory of conversion from ancient culture, but a theory of conversion where culture itself is converted. For him, true religion is not set against culture, false as this culture might be. Rather, it purifies culture by freeing it from its pagan elements. All cultures, including the Greek, are submitted to this process. Clement insists, in this respect, that Greek culture does not constitute an original culture, and as such is neither more powerful, nor closer to truth, than other non-Greek (barbarian) cultures. His aim is to bring together the highest achievements of these civilizations (that is, not only of Judaism, but also of other ancient civilizations) and to reinterpret them within the new framework of Christian truth.

Thus, Clement's understanding of conversion does not require cutting all ties with the pre-Christian cultural world. On the contrary, such an understanding seems to involve broadening the boundaries of cultural memory by accommodating Hebrew, Greek, and also barbarian memories, and incorporating them into a new conception of cultural memory made of materials that are already there, and which Clement prefers to transform rather than reject. Only the pagan gods are rejected. In this way, Clement, more clearly than other early Christian intellectuals, succeeds in creating a new cultural memory, of a kind hitherto unknown. For this is a type of cultural memory that has been created for Christians, a people of a new kind. Neither Greeks nor Jews, but a "Third race," or *triton genos* (*tertium genus*), in the words of the anonymous author of the *Epistle to Diognetus* in the second century, Christians are "a people from among the peoples" (*'ama de 'amamei)*, as Aphrahat, the fourth-century Persian sage, put it.

Some twenty years ago, Raoul Mortley published a study on "The Past in Clement of Alexandria," where he argued that Clement's historiography reflects his search for a Christian identity.[26] According to Mortley, the principles of this historiography, developed mainly in the last chapters of *Stromateis* I (in particular in chapter 21), have received too little attention. In his view, this stems from the fact that these principles (which have little convincing historical value) do not

[26] Mortley (1980).

belong to the main themes of Clement's Platonic theology. Starting off by noting the importance of law and Moses' kingly figure in Clement's discourse, Mortley goes on to analyze the "common culture theory" of the peoples of the *oikoumenē* developed by Clement. The fact that Greek culture is derivative emphasizes the unity of Mediterranean culture, the idea of progressive revelation, and the correspondence between Greek and Israelite culture. More generally, Mortley says, "it is the idea of universal history which gives the clue to the Clementine understanding of the past."[27] The great merit of Mortley's study lies in the attention it gave to Clement's conception of history. Yet, I think that Clement's view of the centrality of religions in universal history, and of Moses as a lawgiver, require further clarification. It is to these themes that I want to devote the remaining pages of this article.[28]

More clearly than any other early Christian writer perhaps, Clement of Alexandria offers a new reflection on the history of religions. To begin with, his is what one could call a comparative history, inscribed in the long ethnological tradition dealing with the religious beliefs and cults of various peoples, which developed from Herodotus to Lucian, through Varro and Tacitus.[29] However, it is to Clement's view of the history *of Greek philosophy* rather than to his view of the history of religions that a sustained intellectual and scholarly interest has been devoted to. Yet, it is clear that, for Clement, philosophy is part of religion. There are a number of reasons for this. First, for the Platonist Clement, philosophy is a preparation for death, and hence cannot be separated from true religiosity, that is, the drive toward the separation of the mind from the body—a separation Clement conceives as a sacrifice. Second, the main tasks of a philosopher are to formulate ideas about God and discuss the nature of the most appropriate cult. As such, philosophers are intellectuals steeped in their own tradition, yet able to reach, understand, and express the highest truths, each in his own voice and language. Hence, all nations, all religious and cultural traditions, possess their own philosophers, not only the Greeks, but also the Egyptians, or the Indians, and in particular the Jews. In fact, the Greeks, when

[27] Ibid., 198.

[28] For an analysis of Moses as Lawgiver in Patristic thought, see Stroumsa (2004).

[29] See Cancik (1997); (2001). On the historiographical context of Luke, see Sterling (1992).

fashioning their philosophy, borrowed not only from the Israelites, but also from Indian and Egyptian "philosophy," i.e., religious thought.[30] With respect to Greek philosophy, in particular, in *Stromateis* V, Clement develops the idea that Greek philosophy is a lower sort of wisdom, whose use is only temporary, while true wisdom (i.e., the Gospel) is eternal. For true wisdom, of which philosophy is but a poor reflection, involves the solid knowledge of divine and human realities.

So, if philosophy is part of religion, then the *history* of philosophy is also part of the *history* of religion. At this point though, Clement confronts the question of how portions of Truth and wisdom can exist outside God's revelation. His answer seems to hesitate between two accounts. The first, based upon the idea of the *logos spermatikos*, (lit. "seminal word") of divine wisdom, or Reason (*Logos*), distributed by God among the nations, is not his own invention, but was developed by Justin Martyr in his *Apology* (around 150). He argued that, along with His Revelation to the Israelites, God endowed mankind with grafts of Reason—that is, with the ways through which men could know Him. *Logos spermatikos* thus explains the existence of Truth, at least in seminal form, throughout the world. The presence of a Divine *logos spermatikos* is reflected, for instance, in Plato's doctrines as well as in those of other philosophers from different societies, while Clement in *Protrepticus*[31] notes how sparks of Divine Logos are found in the Greeks. However, in Justin's Platonic perception, there is no chronological dimension to the action of the *logos spermatikos*. So, while some Christian writers before Clement could grant the pagans a natural knowledge of God, they were unable to conceive of a history of the religions of mankind as a unified history of revelation. It is with Clement that for the first time there appears a universal history understood in a new, integrated way, where different cultures are so many parts of one single story.

The second way in which Clement attempts to account for the presence of wisdom in Greece (and elsewhere) is his own, and is better known. It is usually called the "theft theory", or the "theory of plagiarism". Allegedly, the Greeks had stolen the wisdom they possessed from the Hebrews, probably through the Egyptian priests with whom they had been in contact. The idea of plagiarism is recurrent in various places in Clement's writings, but it is developed in great detail

[30] *Strom.* V. 35-38.
[31] *Protr.* VII. 74.7

in *Stromateis* VI. There, Clement argues that the Greeks plagiarized from one another, as well as from the various barbarian peoples with whom they had been in contact, all sorts of things at the basis of intellectual as well as material culture. Most importantly, though, they plagiarized the sublime ideas about God first developed by the Hebrews, the oldest of all peoples.[32]

In this account, developed at length in the *Stromateis*, particularly in Book V, the existence of Truth outside Revelation is established upon a clear chronological precedence (and hence also a preeminence) of the Law of Moses on other religions and philosophies. The "bits" of Truth found in other societies are (usually unrecognized) "borrowings" from the doctrines of Moses by their thinkers. It is thus not accidental that elsewhere, Clement announces his intention to demonstrate Moses' precedence over the Greek philosophers. The anteriority of Hebrew language and thought is crucial here, and Clement uses it to explain even some of the traits of Greek philosophical writing, such as its enigmatic or esoteric character.[33] Yet, more importantly, the Mosaic antecedence also implies a clear unity of universal history, with a single concept of causality based on influence. Such a conception, which represents a clear departure from Clement's otherwise Platonic patterns of thought, reflects Clement's profound interest in the historical contacts and relationships between peoples—an interest not shared by Justin, for instance. Clement's recognition of the multi-faceted nature of human cultures and history is unique in ancient Christian literature. Despite the obvious apologetic character of his work, this allows him to offer generally useful, detailed, and "objective" observations on various cults and beliefs with what one could almost call an anthropological approach.

V

The "theft theory" permits Clement to offer a reflection on the history of religions that is quite original and interesting. In his *Protrepticus*, or *Exhortation to the Greeks*, Clement seeks to convince enlightened pagans of the value of Christianity, juxtaposing it to both tradition-

[32] *Strom.* I.15.72.4. On the "theft theory", see for instance A. Méhat (1966), 356-361. See further Ridings (1995), esp. 36-50.

[33] *Strom.* I 14.60.1.

al religions and philosophical tradition. Before the appeal of the Logos to conversion, in the last chapters of the work, Clement offers a reasoned criticism of pagan cults and beliefs. His aim is to show how the history of (pagan) religions represents a succession of errors and mistaken perceptions, both of the Divine and of the ethical demands of true religiosity. Of all pagan religions, the worst are, of course, those that practice human sacrifices. For Clement, they are simply beyond the pale of humanity.[34]

As is well known, Clement's references to the Greek mystery cults represent one of the few significant sources of our meager knowledge about them. Following Plato and Philo, he uses the vocabulary of the "*mysteries*" in a metaphorical sense, i*n bonam partem*, in order to describe Christian spiritual life.[35] Like Plutarch, Clement claims that the two worst enemies of true religion are impiety and superstition.[36] He singles out Euhemerus of Agrigente, Nicanor of Cyprus, Diagoras, and Hippo of Melos, as exceptionally wise men, who, more than anyone else, had been able to detect the errors concerning the gods. To be sure, they did not reach Truth, but at least they criticized erroneous religious conceptions. Fighting superstition is an excellent way to start the search for Truth.[37]

Greek philosophers, says Clement, have sometimes been able to guess Truth, even if faintly, like in a dream, when, for instance, they attributed divine nature to some marvelous phenomena.[38] While philosophers who stress matter are actually atheists, Clement takes a real anthropological interest in various reports about the beliefs and cults of barbarian peoples, such as the Persians and the Chaldeans.[39] Clement does not deny that philosophers and poets have sometimes testified to the truth. Illuminated by the sparks of divine *Logos*, their interior master, it is possible that Truth was revealed to them, even if only partially. However, it is only to the prophets of Israel, to Moses' "*thiasos* companions", that one should turn for the Truth about God.[40] If Plato then expresses views that are similar to those of Moses, this can only show that Plato learned

[34] *Protr.* III.
[35] Ibid. II.12-23; XII.120.1. See Riedweg (1987).
[36] *Atheotēs kai deisidaimonia*; II.25.1.
[37] II.24.2.
[38] V.64.1.
[39] V.65.1-4.
[40] VII.79.2.

them from Moses, according to Clement (and Philo, and Numenius of Apamea).[41]

From our perspective, though, the most interesting feature of the *Protrepticus* is the concise history of (pagan) religion, which Clement develops in seven stages that are not necessarily consecutive.[42] In itself, this highly original conception of historiography would have been enough to offer Clement a place among the few observers and historians of religion in the ancient world, such as Herodotus, and his contemporary Lucian. Oddly enough, however, it remains usually ignored, despite the excellent analysis of Arthur J. Droge.[43] Clement begins with the oldest form of religion, i. e., natural religion ("a certain alliance between men and heaven"), later lost in the darkness of ignorance, which gave birth to a succession of mistaken conceptions.[44]

The first of those mistakes was to transform the stars into gods. In this way, people came to worship the sun, like the Indians, or the moon, like the Phrygians. The second was to turn the fruits of the earth into divinities—such as wheat, called Deo by the Athenians, and vine, worshipped as Dionysos among the Thebans. A third mistake was to divinize evils, such as vengeance and punishment, which the poets presented in the form of the Erinyes and the Eumenides. A fourth was that of some philosophers, who following the poets, transformed passions into idols: Fear, Joy, Love, Hope. A fifth error was when other abstract ideas, such as *Dikē* (justice) or *Heimarmenē* (destiny) were also turned into gods and given the appearance of a human body. The sixth mistake was that of Hesiod, who counted twelve gods in his *Theogony*, and it was upon these gods that Homer's theology was based. Finally, the seventh error was to imagine gods and semi-gods was role was to "rescue", "save" and help, such as Heracles, the Dioscures, or Asclepius. For Clement, almost everything about the pagan gods involved invention and fiction.[45] And although all these human inventions sought to make sense of the world, in reality they were only ways of slipping away from Truth and Heaven.

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[41] See Edwards (1990), 64-75. Edwards shows that Numenius' knowledge of Judaism must have been rather small.

[42] *Protr.* II.26.1-8.

[43] Droge (1989), 129-138.

[44] *Protr.* II.25.3.

[45] *Protr.* II.27.4.

According to Droge, along with Paul Wendland a century ago, it is probable that Clement took this taxonomy of pagan divinities from the Stoic *placita*. A similar scheme, for instance, is found in Cicero's *De natura deorum* (49-65). As Droge points out,[46] though, Clement's analysis of religion as a human phenomenon comes also close to the theory of the antiquarian Varro (1st cent. B.C.E.), whom Clement mentions, and who described three types of religion, the natural (*physicum*), the mythical (*mythicum*) and the civic (*gentile*).[47] Further, a similar conception is propounded in Dio Chrysostom's *Oration* 12 ("On Man's First Conception of God," delivered at Olympia in 105 C.E.). Yet, despite the parallels and probable sources of Clement's views, his presentation of religion as a human phenomenon, explained by passions and etiological reasoning, is unique in early Christian literature, and reflects the originality of his effort as a historian of culture and of religion. This is not only due to the fact that Clement is still closely connected to Greek culture, but also to his desire to understand the plurality of religious viewpoints, beliefs, and practices, among foreign nations as well as among Greeks. The degree of accuracy in his ethnological observations (for instance on Egyptian religion, and on the Greek mysteries) is remarkable.

In *Stromateis* VI Clement explains at length the ways in which the Greeks "borrowed" from the Egyptians and the Indians. In doing so, he devotes much attention to Egyptian and Indian religion. His description of Egyptian festivals, especially of Egyptian processions, and Indian religious philosophy, for which India was well known in the ancient world, represents an important part of the book.[48] Further, in *Stromateis* V.7, Clement presents a theory of Egyptian religious esotericism, as reflected in their enigmatic forms of expression and symbols. In his view, there is no difference between cult and philosophy in ancient Egypt.[49] Thus, when the Greeks "borrowed" from this Egyptian wisdom, their "borrowings" did not have only a cultural or a philosophical character. Their borrowings also had a religious character, and this was reflected in the fact that the Greeks, too, had prophets (5.42.2).

As is well known, there is no single Greek word equivalent to the

[46] Droge (1989), 129-138.
[47] *Apud* Augustine, *De Civitate Dei* VI.5. Droge, 135.
[48] *Strom.* VI.4.35.1-4.38.12. On Egyptian religion, see *Strom.* VI. 4.35.1-3.
[49] *Strom.* VI.4.37.3.

Latin *religio*. Indeed, it is notoriously difficult to define religion in the Greek world. Various words, such as *thrēskeia* and *eusebeia*, carry connotations of piety, and correct religious behavior. In any case, though, what is clear in the Greek view is that any religion is, first of all, a religious law, a *nomos*. And while not all *nomoi* are of a religious nature, religion requires practice, following traditional rules, set perhaps from time immemorial, but eventually going back to a lawgiver, a *nomothetēs*. Each people has its own lawgiver. And a religion is, first of all, a set of laws given by an often mythical, "national" leader who gave to the nation the *corpus* of its laws at the dawn of (its) history. Hence, reflection on the nature of religion would also necessarily touch upon the figure of the lawgiver, his identity, his qualities, and his role. Indeed, Greek, Roman, and Jewish thinkers had all reflected on the figure of the *nomothetēs*. It will remain the topic of another study, though, to show how, for Clement and other early Christian intellectuals, the figures of Numa Pompilius, the mythical Roman king, who gave the Romans their religion, and of Moses, became joined in the new paradigm of the lawgiver, at once political leader and religious figure.[50] The integration of Numa and Moses in Christian literature would be eventually fully accomplished with the success of Christianity. The first Roman emperor to become a Christian would be presented by his clerical admirers (I am thinking here especially of Eusebius of Casesarea) as a new Moses, rather than as Numa *redivivus*.

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[50] See Stroumsa (2003).

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"THE RELIGION OF LIGHT" ON MANI AND MANICHAEISM

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Mani, the self-proclaimed "living Paraclete," prophet of what came to be called the religion of Light, was born within the Parthian Empire at Seleucia- Ctesiphon in Babylonia on April 14 in the year 216 CE. His father, Patek, may well have been a kinsman of the Parthian royal house and his mother, Mariam, though bearing a Jewish-Christian name, also seems to have belonged to a Parthian princely family. In the year Mani was born, King Artabanus V had been on the throne for four years. He was to be the last of the Parthian monarchs. Ten years after Mani's birth, the Parthian dynasty was overthrown by the Persian Ardashir 1, founder of the second, Sassanian, Persian Empire, which was to endure from 226 until its destruction at the hands of the Muslim Arabs in 652. The period of Mani's ministry falls almost entirely within the reign King Ardashir's successor, Shapur I, who occupied the imperial throne between 242 and 273, and who seems to have had some sympathy for the prophet's teachings. These thirty years were the years of Mani's great missionary journeys. They saw the composition of the seven books of the Manichaean canon and the founding of the Manichaean Church which was, in places, to survive the martyrdom of its founder by more than one thousand years.

On the death of Shapur I his son Hormizd became king. He lived for scarcely a year and was succeeded by his brother Bahram I. The new king was strongly under the influence of the Zoroastrian High Priest, Karter—a determined prelate of great historical significance under whose leadership the Persian national faith became, for the first time, a persecuting religion. At the instigation of the High Priest, Mani was summoned to the royal court, where he was accused of attempting to lead the Persian people away from what had become, under the Sassanid dynasty, the established religion of the restored empire. In answer to the charge, Mani pointed to the number of

times he had healed members of the king's family and household. But when he claimed that his mission was inspired by a new divine revelation, superseding that once given to Zoroaster, the king asked him, "Why was this revelation made to thee, and not to us, who are masters of the land?" Mani replied simply, "Such is the will of God."[1]

Then the king ordered the prophet to be bound with heavy shackles of a type we know also from the record of Zoroastrian Persia's Christian martyrs. Thus bound, he was taken to prison where he died after twenty-six days, on February 26, 277. Mani was sixty years old. In accordance with Persian custom, during his last days he was permitted to speak with his disciples, to whom he gave his final instructions. A Manichaean priest called Uzzai and two other disciples were present at his death, which supposedly took place at eleven o'clock in the morning, when, as the records have it, "He ascended out of his body to the dwellings of his greatness on high."

Mani's body was cut into pieces. The head was displayed at the city gate and the rest was ordered to be thrown to the dogs. However, according to Manichacan sources, the prophet's remains were gathered by the faithful, and later buried at Ctesiphon, the city of his birth. King Bahram commanded that the religion of Mani be extirpated; and thus began the first of the persecutions to which the religion of Light was to be subject throughout its history and which were, eventually, to eliminate it from the face of the earth.

Manichaeism has the dubious distinction of being the only great world religion to have been persecuted out of existence. Yet, in the 1,200 years that it endured as a distinct church, it spread to North Africa and Spain in the West and to China in the East. The two great finds of Manichaean literature that have so much increased our knowledge of the religion in this century occurred respectively in Egypt and in Chinese Turkestan. While previously our knowledge of Manichaeism depended almost entirely on the testimony of the Christians, Muslims, Zoroastrians and others who fought against its influence, we now possess significant portions of the Manichaean scriptures and a large number of psalms and hymns that bear eloquent testimony to its profound and distinctive spirituality—a spirituality that long endured the merciless persecutions of a world whose goodness Manichaean doctrine and experience alike denied.

[1] Puech (1949), 51.

Archaeological finds in Central Asia have also brought to light fascinating developments in an area where Manichaeism enjoyed its greatest worldly success, and where, uniquely, it was able to establish itself as the official religion of state, among the Uighur Turks. At a time, the sixth century, when the Manichaean Church was on the verge of extinction in the Christian West, it was entering a period of expansion among the peoples of the steppes that was to culminate in the conversion of the Uighur prince, Bogu Khan, in 762. This was the high point in a long-term process of missionary activity which had begun, at the latest, in the years immediately following Mani's martyrdom; when, as we know, Mar Amo, one of the prophet's closest associates and his chosen missionary to the East, was already active in the regions of Abasahr and Merv. According to a surviving fragment of the history of his mission, Mani's apostle "converted numerous kings and rulers, grandees and noble-men, queens and ladies, princes and princesses."[2] Whatever may have been the immediate effects of Mar Amo's mission, it was primarily through the medium of Sogdian merchants, an Iranian people who controlled much of the important trade between the Middle East and China, that the religion spread to the peoples of Turkestan and beyond, into China itself. Arab sources mention the strength of Manichaeism in the cities of Tashkent and Samarkand, where there were considerable Sogdian populations; and it was to the latter city that the scat of the Manichaean supreme pontificate was transferred from Babylon in the tenth century, following the renewal of persecution by the Abbasid Caliphs. There were colonies of Sogdian merchants in all the cities that stood along the trade route to China, and these included members of the learned "elect" of the Manichaean Church. It was following his capture of the major city of Lo-Yang that the Uighur Khan was converted by Sogdian Manichaeans. Following his own conversion, Bogu Khan instituted the religion as the state cult throughout his domains, establishing and endowing Manichaean monasteries and, in the manner of religions of state, endeavouring to root out its potential rivals. In keeping with the ascetic orientation of his new faith, his policy took a distinctly iconoclastic turn. In a royal decree, the Manichaean king declared: "All images of demons, sculptures and paintings shall be destroyed by fire; all those

[2] Ibid.

who venerate genii and fall down before them should ... here the text is broken ... and the religion of Light should be accepted."[3]

This period of Manichaean prosperity is reflected in a distinctive style of religious literature that, while never quite betraying Mani's teachings concerning the intrinsically evil character of this world, places less emphasis on the frightfulness of the human condition than do the Coptic psalms discovered in Egypt. According to H. J. Klimkeit in his study of Manichaean kingship:

> The texts of Turkish Manichaeism allow us to discern an attitude to the world to be found nowhere else in the realm of Gnosticism. Being protected by a Manichaean king, the community of scribes and elect could assess the world as a place where the blessings of the gods was experienced already. Certainly ultimate salvation could only be found in the other world, but the light of that other world already shone into this world.[4]

Such periods of worldly security were rare in the history of Manichaeism, and the power of the Manichaean Uighur state was itself short-lived. In 840 it fell to Kirghiz invaders; though it seems that a smaller Manichaean kingdom was subsequently established by Uighur refugees in Kansu and the Tarim basin, in what is now Chinese Turkestan, about 850. This minor successor state survived for about four hundred years until it too was destroyed, like so many others, by the Mongol horde of Genghis Khan in the thirteenth century. Further east still, Manichaean influence may have been responsible for the introduction of the planetary calendar into China, while two of Mani's works were incorporated into the Taoist canon. In the southern province of Fukien, in particular, where Mani was worshipped as the Buddha of light, Manichaeism seems to have remained strong until at least the fourteenth century, but thereafter we lose sight of the religion even in its last far oriental strongholds.

Deprived of external political support and cut off from what had been its religious centre by the Mongol devastation Central Asia, the religion of light, which had once seemed a strong and dangerous challenge to the spiritual hegemony of Chinese Buddhism, appears to have been absorbed almost without a trace in the syncretistic religious culture of China.

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[3] H.J. Klimkeit, "Manichaean Kingship: Gnosis at Home in the World." 29, p.20.

[4] Ibid, 30.

No one knows when the faith and church of Mani finally died out in China; but, as George Widengren remarks in what is almost an afterthought to his history of Manichaeism: "There were probably Chinese Manichees as late as modern times."[5]

In its original homeland and in the West, Manichaeism, as a distinct religion and an organized church, is long extinct. There is, though, a vast and intriguing literature devoted to possible Manichaean influences on various Muslim heresies as well as on such heretical Christian groups as the Paulicians, the Bogomils and the Albigensians. Taking their cue from the early Christian opponents of institutionalized Manichaeism as it had existed in the three centuries following Mani's death, later orthodox opponents of these sects tended to describe as "Manichaean" everything in heretical teaching that smacked of a Gnostic contempt for a world order endorsed by Western Catholicism and Eastern Orthodoxy alike. It is indeed quite possible that there was a covert, specifically Manichaean influence on some of these world-denying heresies; but interest in putative Manichaean currents in what were undoubtedly Christian heresies has sometimes distracted attention from the original phenomenon itself, and this has led to a rather loose use of terms. People sometimes use the terms "Manichaean" or "Manichee" to describe any dualist view of the world, while having little conception of Manichaeism as a religion in its own right.

The religion of light was neither a popularized summation of preexisting Gnostic currents, nor a Christian or Zoroastrian heresy, as it has sometimes been conceived. It was a faith that aspired to be the universal church, founded upon the revelation of God to his chosen prophet Mani in Babylonia in the reign of King Ardashir I, and endowed by its founder with a powerful eschatological vision and an inclusive body of doctrine.

It is that faith and doctrine, *Manichaeism* in the strict sense of the term, that I want to examine in this essay. I undertake the task in the belief that not only is it of interest in itself but that without some knowledge of what the Manichaean Church professed, all generalizations about "Manichaean", and, perhaps more generally, Gnostic, influences in Western history, as well as loose talk about an enduring Manichaean world-view or mind-set, are necessarily pre-

[5] Widengren (1965), 134.

mature. Since some of the most interesting work on the nature of modern, quasi-religious ideologies depends upon such references, notably the wide-ranging analyses of Eric Voegelin and Alain Besançon's brilliant study of the intellectual origins of Leninism,[6] the task in hand is intended not only as a contribution to the history of religions but also as providing a helpful side-light on some of the most pressing problems of our present political and spiritual predicament. Let us then begin by looking at the experiential sources of Mani's religion—the time and place of its founding and the revelatory events which were its specific occasion.

The Babylon of Mani's youth was a meeting place for most of the religious cross-currents of late antiquity. It was a city of individuals in search of truth and certainty in the midst of a world made uncertain by political and religious upheaval and by the perennial clash of great military powers. Within its boundaries there were Jews, Christians, Buddhists, Zoroastrians of various sects, and devotees of various mystery cults, as well as followers of many of the numerous Gnostic teachers of the time. Shortly before Mani's birth, his father, Patek, had joined a Gnostic baptizing sect—perhaps the Mandaeans but more probably the ascetic Jewish-Christian sect known as the Elkesaites.

Arab sources tell us that, while praying in "the House of Idols", Patek heard a voice calling him from the inner sanctuary. On three successive days the mysterious voice summoned him to abstain from meat, wine and women. Patek's asceticism may have influenced the attitude of the young Mani, and, together with what seems to have been a slight physical deformity in the boy, may have predisposed the future prophet to the world-rejecting faith to which his life and death bear witness.

Mani tells us that, when he was twelve, an angel appeared to him in what was to be the first of two revelations. The angel told him to forsake his father's congregation, saying: "Thou art not of its followers. The guidance of morals, the restraint of appetites, these are thy tasks. Yet because of thy youth the time is not come to stand forth openly." According to the Coptic texts, the content of the revelation was given to Mani on this first visitation; but it was not until twelve years later, in 240 or 241, that the prophet was com-

[6] Voegelin (1968), Besançon (1981).

manded to go out and proclaim the truth to the world. This time the angel said: "Peace unto thee, Mani, from me and from the Lord who sent me to thee and who has selected thee for his apostleship. He bids thee now to call the people to the truth and to proclaim from him the good message of the truth and to dedicate thyself to this task. The time is now come for thee to stand forth openly and to preach the teaching."

In the *Kephalaia,* the "Chapters of the Teacher" found at Medinet Madi in Egypt, the first revelation is described thus:

> The Living Paraclete came down to me and spoke to me. He revealed to me the hidden mystery that was hidden from the world and the generations: the mystery of the Depth and the Height. He revealed to me the mystery of the Light and the Darkness, the mystery of the conflict and the great war which the Darkness stirred up. He revealed to me how the Light overcame the Darkness by their intermingling and how (in consequence) this world was set up.... He enlightened me on the mystery of the forming of Adam, the first man. He instructed me on the mystery of the Tree of Knowledge, of which Adam ate, by which his eyes were made to see; the mystery of the Apostles, who were sent into this world to select the churches .... Thus was revealed to me by the Paraclete all that has been and that shall be, and all that the eye sees and the ear hears and the thought thinks. Through him I learned to know everything. I saw the All through him, and I became one body and one spirit.[7]

In this text Mani makes the claim that he is not merely one prophet among others but has become, in consequence of the revelatory event, somehow consubstantial with the Holy Spirit whose coming had been foretold by Jesus. Mani presents his revelation as the true Pentecost, the coming of the Holy Spirit into the world of men. But, typically, it is not only the Christian pledge that Mani claims to redeem. Christianity is only one among several sources of revelatory premonition. God had revealed his truth in part to earlier prophets, to Zoroaster and the Buddha as well as Jesus, but the religions founded by these figures had achieved only local importance. Worse than this, Mani claims, the original divinely revealed truth of their teachings had become lost or, at the least, corrupted because the prophets had not themselves committed it to writing but had entrusted the composing of the scriptures to disciples. The truth of Mani's religion was to be vouchsafed by the fact that its teachings were to

[7] Jonas (1963), 208-209.

be inscribed by the recipient and vehicle of revelation himself. This emphasis on the written word is characteristic of Manichaeism, which is, perhaps even more than the Koranic faith of Islam, emphatically a religion of the book. Nor is this obsession with the question of scriptural and revelatory literalism surprising when we consider the rampant sectarianism and doctrinal conflict typical of the religious traditions with which the young Mani was familiar.

Like Muhammad after him, Mani presents himself as the last prophet of God, the successor and perfector of earlier, authentic but incomplete revelations. But, unlike the prophet of Allah, Mani did not conceive himself as emerging out of a single, historic tradition of prophecy. Rather, as Voegelin puts it, "The sequence of the messengers and their religions is not merely a succession in time but something like a confluence of independently rising waters into the one great river of truth represented by Mani."[8] Voegelin's vivid simile must of course be qualified, as his own theological observations attest, by the recognition that beneath each isolated revelatory spring lies a common divine source of the truth that is revealed. While there is no single, exclusive revelatory tradition, it is, at least according to the prophet of the religion of Light, the same God who speaks through the mouths of his various prophets. It is worth noting that, whether or not he would have included Mani among that company, this would also seem to have been Voegelin's view.

In the *Shabhuragan,* a work written in Persia by Mani for King Shapur I, we read:

> Wisdom and deeds have always from time to time been brought to mankind, by the messenger called Buddha to India, in another by Zoroaster to Persia, in another by Jesus to the West. Thereupon this revelation has come down, this prophecy in this last age, through me, Mani, messenger of the God of truth to Babylon.[9]

A passage in the *Kephalaia* expands on this theme:

> The writings and the wisdom and the apocalypses and the psalms of all the earlier churches have assembled with the wisdom revealed by me. As water comes to water and becomes a great water, thus have the ancient books come to my writing and become a great wisdom. The like has never been announced among the ancient generations.

[8] Voegelin (1974), 138.
[9] Ibid.

> Never have been written nor have been revealed the books as I have written them.[10]

Living, as he thought, in the last times, when the cosmic drama of redemption was approaching its climax, Mani understood himself to be the bearer of perfect, universal truth. He conceived his church, founded as it was at the geographical meeting place of the religious cultures of East and West, to be the divinely instituted, perfected inheritor and guardian of all earlier revelations. Mani's teaching claimed to encompass all that was true in other faiths. In that sense it was perfectly attuned to the spiritual requirements of what Voegelin has called the "ecumenic age"—an age in which the military-political expansion of great imperial powers had broken down the previous order of ethnically and religiously undifferentiated, tribal or city states and incorporated their inhabitants, more or less unwillingly, in multi-ethnic and potentially universal empires. Against the background of such a world, men seem increasingly to have sought, in religious movements no less universal in intention than the contemporary empires, both a recipe for salvation that might, in principle, encompass all mankind and an explanation for the experienced disorder of the world. Manichaeism provided both in full measure, combining an ecumenic commitment to universal religious enlightenment with a characteristically Gnostic emphasis on the material world, rather than human sinfulness, as the ontological *locus* of experienced evil.

In common with earlier varieties of Gnosticism, but more ambitiously than any of them, Manichaean writings purport to convey, through the medium of a distinct myth of spiritual salvation, the inner truth of other scriptures. But, in its ecumenic ambitions, the religion of Light shows itself to be something more than simply another Gnostic sect. Mani did not, in the manner, for example, of such teachers as Valentinus, seek to tease out the esoteric meaning of preexisting texts for the sake of the initiated few—the spiritually privileged *pneumatics* who had already found the key to salvation through coming to understand their true spiritual, immaterial and other-worldly identity. Rather, like the mainstream of Christianity, the religion was preached as a new and open message, divinely revealed to God's chosen messenger, and intended for an audience

[10] Ibid, p.139.

that encompassed the learned and the ignorant alike. In contrast to most other varieties of Gnosticism, Manichaeism was not intended to be a sect for the enlightened few but was to be the true religion for all.

Nor was the religion of Light a merely syncretistic phenomenon. While Mani described himself as the successor of Zoroaster, Buddha and Jesus, and while his disciples presented his truth in terms that varied depending on the religious background of the audiences they addressed, Manichaeism is emphatically not a *bricolage* of other men's beliefs and doctrines. By turns it uses the vocabulary of Zoroastrianism and Christianity, of Buddhism and of Greek philosophy, yet its core is not Zoroastrian, Christian, Buddhist or Hellenic, but is to be found in a powerful and dramatic vision of the nature and destiny of the cosmos and of the place of man within and, crucially, beyond it. This distinctive vision is unmistakably Mani's own.

Manichaeism is essentially an elaboration and explication of a central vision of struggle and redemption. Its core is expressed in what the French scholar H.C. Puech calls the "double doctrine" of the "Two Principles and the Three Times."[11] The Two Principles are the radically opposed forces that make themselves known in the struggle between light and darkness, Good and Evil, Spirit and Matter. It is central to the Manichaean world-view that these opposed forces are seen, not as contrasting aspects of a single tensional Reality, but as manifestations of two incompatible realities. These two realities are in origin radically foreign to each other and ultimately they are to be separated once more.

The Three Times are the moments in the process in which the Two Principles, initially isolated, come into contact with one another, intermingle in the confusion of cosmic struggle, and are finally set apart once more. Manichaeism is thus a radically dualist religion. The Two Principles have no common source and can have no common destiny—a point of great importance for the Manichaean doctrine of a purely spiritual redemption and the Manichees' consequent rejection of anything that suggested either the possibility or the desirability of the resurrection of the body. In the beginning, the First Time, the Two Principles existed, from eternity, in isolation from each other, and so they shall eternally be in the Third Time

[11] Puech, op. cit.

to come. It is the Second Time alone, which encompasses the whole drama of cosmic struggle and spiritual redemption, that is the major focus of Manichaean teaching.

Manichaeism is a religion concerned almost exclusively with questions of eschatology. What other religions regard as the equivalent, initial mystery of cosmic creation is, in Manichaeism, only an incident in the single drama of ultimate redemption by which Light gathers back into itself the fragments of its own substance that have become entrapped by Darkness in the course of struggle. The cosmos is not conceived as a system in equilibrium but as an unstable compound of incompatibles; and the process by which it is called into being—Mani pointedly avoids the term *creation*—is merely a relatively late moment in an eschatological process which is already underway and to whose ends it is strictly subject.

In Manichaeism the cosmos as we know it is neither, as in classical paganism, an eternal and perhaps divine reality, nor, as in Judaism and Christianity, a free manifestation of God's bounteous creativity. It is, at best, a tool or weapon of war, a necessary means to the ultimate, a cosmic end of the renewal of the purity of divine Light.

It is this process that is the subject of the central Manichaean myth. Experiencing the world as the field of battle between opposite and incompatible forces, the Manichaean explains the situation through a grandiose and complex mythology. We have the evidence of St. Augustine, a Manichaean for fourteen years, that this all-encompassing myth, which appears so strangely forced and artificial to the modern reader, was one of the most powerful weapons in the Manichaean missionary's armoury. To the modern consciousness, the ability of the myth to explain every mystery of existence is likely to indicate an unacceptable degree of poetic licence on the part of its Prophet-author. The story is simply too complete as well as too complex to ring true to an age which, when it admits to the reality of divine revelation at all, can hardly conceive it in terms other than stray intimations of immortality or isolated signs of God's loving care.

A myth like Mani's—especially when we know it to have been taught by one who was a sophisticated preacher and organizer, and which bears such marks of apparently conscious craft—seems proof not of the truth but of the falsity of the religion in which it plays so central a role. To the Neoplatonic philosopher, Alexander Lycopolis, it already seemed that way a generation after Mani's death. In

consequence, if we are even to begin to understand Manichaeism as it understood itself and as it was understood by those who were attracted to it, we have to recognize that our conceptions of what could possibly be true are, no less than those of Mani's audience, limited ones, typical of our own time and place; and that, as a matter of creaturely modesty, we should not presume to prejudge *a priori* the forms that divine revelation can take.

When Mani taught that the Holy Spirit had revealed the Hidden Mysteries to him, he was claiming the myth itself to be the very substance of the revelation. There is, so far as we can determine, no question here of myth being subsequent to or an elaboration upon an otherwise ineffable truth; nor, as so often in Plato, is the myth a carefully crafted supplement to an otherwise rationally formulated teaching. The truth of Manichaean myth is intended to be taken literally and not metaphorically. Thus, "to reveal the hidden mysteries" is nothing other than to identify the spiritually decisive events recounted in the revelatory myth—events preceding the formation of the cosmos, that could not be known apart from their revelation but which, once revealed, explain the present state of man and the world in terms of their necessary consequences. For such a purpose, myth may indeed be indispensable and, bearing in mind our caution regarding the unforeseeable possibilities of divine revelation, the fact that the Manichaean myth seems unbelievable today is not *ipso facto* proof that it is untrue.

Let us then attempt to summarize the tale in which, as men and women, we play our allotted part. In the beginning Light and Darkness existed as utterly separate realities. In the realm of Light all was peace and quiet, but in the domains of Darkness there was only strife and turmoil. The disordered motion of matter—graphically represented as a state of constant civil war and endless battle and pursuit between dark substances that cannot even recognize their fellowship in evil—drives the forces of Darkness to explode beyond their original boundaries and so, eventually, to encounter the Light. Struck by the unaccustomed beauty of what they see, the forces of Darkness desire to conquer and possess it. The Father of greatness, as the God of Light is called, realizes his danger, but, by his very nature, he is unfitted and unused to war. So he calls into being, from his own spiritual substance, a first emanation, called the Mother of Life. She, in turn, calls into being Primal Man who is charged to fight the forces of Darkness. Thus, proceeding herself from pure spirit, the Mother

of Life engenders an original warrior, who bears the name of Man but is not yet the mixed compound of spirit and matter we know today. Accompanied by his five sons—the so-called Luminous Elements of Air, Water, Wind, Light and Fire—Primal Man battles with the Enemy but is overwhelmed. Defeated, he is captured and bound, and the five Luminous Elements are devoured by the Darkness.

However, this apparent defeat is not total; for in consuming, in the form of the Luminous Elements, what are, essentially, emanated particles of Light, Darkness has ingested elements that are opposed to its own essential nature and which will, thereafter, weaken its continuing assault upon the realm of Light. At the same time, part of the substance of the Father of Greatness has become entrapped in the Darkness, and this must be redeemed. Thus, a succession of primordial events, themselves provoked by the aggressive yet originally purposeless disorder of Darkness, events that culminate in what seems, at first sight, to be an unmitigated defeat for the forces of Light, both sets the stage for the subsequent drama of redemption and guarantees the eventual triumph of the Father of Light.

At the request of the Mother of life, the Father then evokes another being, the Living Spirit, to rescue Primal Man from his captivity. The Living Spirit descends to the frontiers of Darkness and calls into the shadows: "Greetings O Good Man in the midst of Evil, O Creature of Light in the midst of Darkness." The call is heard and Primal Man answers: "How goes it with our Fathers, the Sons of Light in their City?"

Then the Living Spirit commands three of his sons to kill and flay the Archons, the Sons of darkness, and to bring their bodies to the Mother of Life. Out of their skins she makes the heavens, and, casting the bodies back into the dark, she forms the Earth.

This accomplishes the rescue of Primal Man. But this first redemption of trapped elements of captured Light, in which we can recognize the common Gnostic theme of the saved saviour—the redeemer who must himself be redeemed—is incomplete. The five Luminous Elements, who are, in essence, not at all cosmic substances, but emanated elements of spirit ingested in Matter, remain trapped in the Darkness. At this point the macrocosm is called into being to provide what has aptly been called a machinery of salvation.

Out of the purest particles of Light the Living Spirit forms the Moon and the Sun. These are respectively to be the means of drawing light out of the darkness, and the temporary storehouse in which light

can gather on its way back to it's a cosmic source. Mani taught that the phases of the Moon correspond to the rhythm of this operation. The Moon waxes as it grows full with the particles it absorbs, and wanes as these are transferred to the Sun on their way to the perfect kingdom beyond the cosmos. Thus, by a sort of cosmic water-wheel—more precisely a Light-wheel—fragments of entrapped Light, or Spirit, are lifted by the Moon to the Sun, and thence back to the pure domain of Light itself.

Even this new mechanism of redemption does not exhaust the ingenuity of the Father of Greatness in his effort to recover the still trapped particles of Light, which are, we must recall, consubstantial with him. His next move is to evoke an androgynous being of great beauty called, as the successor of Primal Man and the Living Spirit, the Third Messenger. Appearing naked to the surviving male demons as an infinitely desirable virgin, the Third Messenger causes them to ejaculate particles of Light. Falling upon the earth these particles are the seeds from which the plants of the world are generated. For this reason Manichaeism teaches that, of all the world's beings, plants contain the highest proportion of Light; and this, as we shall see, forms the justification for the strict dietary rules enjoined upon the elect of the Manichaean Church.

Appearing before the female demons, who are already pregnant perhaps as a result of continual orgies with their male counterparts, the Third Messenger takes the form of a beautiful youth. Maddened by desire, the female demons abort, and from their offspring the animal species are said to derive. Thus, as opposed to the plants, animals are seen as purely and substantially evil in origin—creatures of pure, dark matter. Yet they too have a part to play in the redemptive scheme; for, as they consume the blossom and fruit of the plants, the beasts absorb, in turn, a certain portion of entrapped light. Thus is set the scene for the creation of man.

Here, in contrast to the formation of plants and even animals, the initiative for creation comes directly from the powers of Darkness. Fearful of losing the last of its captive Light to the ever more ingenious counter-attacks of the Father of Greatness, the Darkness, which is, we recall, identified with Matter and Evil, contrives its own final plot. Two demons, one male, the other female, are deputed to devour all the remaining fragments of Light. Having eaten most of them, the two engender between them Adam and Eve. Thus the origins of mankind are attributed to a process composed in equal

parts of cannibalism and sexuality in what is, as Mircea Eliade has described, "probably the most tragic and certainly the most humiliating anthropogenic myth that exists."[12]

Formed from the filth of Matter, Adam belongs to the realm of Darkness by reason of his bodily needs and carnal desires. He is created blind and deaf, unaware that there is within him anything that pertains to the realm of Spirit and Light. Yet, as the offspring of the two great Light-devouring demons, the body of Adam, the carnal form of man, has now become the prison within which the greatest proportion of the still-estranged Light particles are to be found. Thus, in Hans Jonas' words, "From now on the struggle between Light and Darkness concentrates upon man, who becomes the main prize and at the same time the main battlefield of the two contending parties. In him both sides have almost all their stakes: Light, that of its own restoration; Darkness, that of its very survival." This, Jonas claims, "is the metaphysical centre of the Manichaean religion, and it enhances the deeds and destiny of individual man to an absolute importance in the history of total existence."[13]

To redeem the Light within man, yet another new saviour is evoked. This figure, variously called the Light-Jesus or Ohrmazd, awakens Adam and tells him of his spiritual kinship and of the state of his soul's imprisonment in the world: "Then Adam examined himself and recognized who he was. And the Light-Jesus showed him the fathers in the heights and his own soul cast into the midst of all, exposed to the teeth of panthers... devoured by the devourers, consumed by the consumers, eaten by dogs, mingled with and imprisoned in everything that exists, shackled in the stench of darkness.... The Light-Jesus raised Adam up and made him eat of the Tree of Life. Then Adam glanced upward and wept raising his voice powerfully like a lion roaring. He tore his hair, beat his breast and said: "Woe, woe unto him, the Sculptor of my Body, woe unto him who has shackled my soul and woe to the rebellious ones who have enslaved me."[14]

Though the redemption of the souls of the human species is, in part, analogous to the salvation of Primal Man, there is this important distinction. While Primal Man is a spiritual being, an emana-

[12] Eliade (1982), 393.
[13] Jonas, op. cit. 227.
[14] Haardt (1971).

tion of pure Light, who has been captured but not absorbed by matter, Adam is primordially a creature of Darkness, a being whose soul alone is worthy or capable of salvation. In Manichaeism, man as such is not truly the object of divine redemption. The offspring of Adam and Eve can never be raised to the realm of Light, for, as men and women, they do not belong there.

Indeed, even the statement that Manichaeism preaches the salvation of the soul of man may somewhat overstate the case. Some texts seem to differentiate the soul as such from the spiritual elements of which it is merely the earthly, and so irredeemable, form. Thus the Manichaean doctrine of redemption is not to be confused with the Christian doctrine of personal salvation. It is not anything distinctly pertaining to man that is to be saved from ultimate oblivion but rather a portion of God's substance lost in the world. This would seem to suggest a form of a cosmic, impersonal afterlife more akin to Hindu and Buddhist conceptions than to that of Christianity. But the teachings of the religion of Light are not unequivocal on this point; and most of the surviving Coptic Psalms end with a doxology in which prayers for the souls of various Egyptian martyrs are invoked. Whether this is consistent with Mani's teaching, or whether it represents a subsequent and perhaps local concession to hopes for a personal afterlife is not altogether clear.

The ultimate redemption of entrapped Light, which is the moving force of the cosmic drama, involves a lengthy process of abstraction and refinement in which the practices of the Manichaean Church play a crucial role. Manichaeism enjoins asceticism on its followers but for reasons that are not so much ethical as eschatological. Here, as everywhere in the religion of Light, everything is subject to what we may term the eschatological imperative; and good is simply whatever contributes to the redemption of imprisoned Light through the removal of its particles from the world. The less a man participates in the processes of the material world, the less he serves the purpose of Evil, which is to prolong the imprisonment of Light within the Darkness.

The accomplishment of the redemption of light from entrapment in the world enjoins upon the Elect of the Manichaean Church, more than a general predisposition toward asceticism, a very precise formula of living designed to ensure the maximum possible absorption and refinement of Light particles. The Manichaean Elect, the priesthood of the Church, were required to be celibate and to subsist on

a diet of fruit alone; particularly on such fruits as melons and cucumbers in which, quite visibly, the particles of light appeared to be most heavily concentrated. By living in this ascetic fashion, the Elect were not so much giving a moral example to a world held to be beyond redemption, as contributing to the ingathering of Light particles through ingestion. The digestive tract is conceived, quite literally to be an eschatological vehicle: and the injunction to celibacy is no more than the necessary supplement to the process of light-gathering initially accomplished through eating.

Drawing on an ancient Indo-European belief according to which semen is the means by which spiritual element in man is transmitted through the generations—a widespread belief which we find, for example, in Apollo's argument for the innocence of the matricide Orestes in the final part of Aeschylus' Oresteia—the Manichaeans describe procreation as a diabolic stratagem designed by the Prince of Darkness to ensure the continued entrapment of sperm-borne Light in new material bodies. As celibates, the Manichaean Elect play no part in this process. So, in consequence of his celibacy, when one of the Manichaean priesthood died, the Light he had absorbed in life would re-enter the spiritual sphere as part of his liberated soul, even as his body went its way of stinking decay in the dank mass of matter to which it belonged. At the end of things, Mani taught, the last remaining Light within the world would be retrieved; and the Darkness, weakened by struggle, would be cast into an inescapable pit, never to emerge again.

Summarized thus, the myth is likely to strike the modern reader as a work of lurid imagination and cold artifice. As indicated earlier, the very completeness of the myth, its ability to explain everything in the most graphic terms, is, even more than its extraordinary literalism, enough to disqualify it as a serious candidate for contemporary belief. Furthermore, it is a relatively simple matter to pick apart the elements of traditional Iranian dualism from the Gnostic horror of bodily existence with which they are combined in so complex a construction. And this too, in spite of Mani's own avowal of his position as divinely appointed heir to the numerous and diverse revelations of the past, is likely to encourage scepticism with regard to the authenticity of the claim to original revelation. But there is more to the Manichaean myth than the sum of the influences—Zoroastrian, Christian and Mesopotamian—that we can detect within it. There is a unity to the whole that gives it a grandeur and pathos

all its own and allows us to speak, with Eliade, of the "tragic pessimism" of the system.

The source of this unity lies not in the diversity of historical origins to which the content of the myth bears witness. Rather, the myth illuminates, in a powerful way, the experience of worldly evil and the aspiration to perfection of an imperfect form of life which is coeval with mankind. It is this, the existential rather than the historical root of the Manichaean world-view, which gives the myth its unity and even a certain outrageous plausibility.

It is easy to see why the religion of Light should have been regarded as so blasphemous by those whose religions taught them to love God by trusting in the ultimate goodness of His creation. To these, Zoroastrians and Christians alike, it must have seemed that Mani had appropriated the most precious of religious truths only to recombine them in a form in which the significance of each was reversed. In a world where faith is hard and trust so often belied, Mani's combination of explanatory myth, existential dissatisfaction and eschatological hope presented a challenge to which every established power of this world and the next was summoned to respond.

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ARABIA AND THE HERITAGE OF THE AXIAL AGE

JAN RETSÖ

The term "Axial Age" was originally used to designate an epoch roughly bound by 800 and 200 BCE. This era was marked by far-reaching changes in mentality occurring in both the West and East. These changes are manifest above all in the rise of the "founded" religions: the faith of Israel/Judaism, out of which Christianity and Islam developed, Buddhism and the religions and philosophies of China as well as the emergence of Greek philosophy. S. N. Eisenstadt has described the fundamental characteristic of the "axial breakthrough" as the emergence, conceptualization and institutionalization of a basic tension between transcendental and mundane orders.[1] This distinction does not necessarily imply a consistent opposition between the this-worldly and other-worldly. It often appears as a non-polarizing separation of two levels of order, one higher, ideal and perfect and another lower, real and imperfect. This dichotomy became a perpetual source of projects aimed at the transformation of the second world and its ultimate alignment with the first.

Arguably, these movements arose from the experience of profound changes in societies during this epoch; the decisive factor was the breakdown of Bronze Age cultures and the world-view associated with them. In the West, i.e. the Middle East and the Eastern Mediterranean, the new ideologies and world-views can be interpreted as attempts at a reorientation in a changed environment. They were based on the idea of the individual as a unique phenomenon in a world which did not have any apparent immediate concern for the individual. This is not to say that all axial ideologies are individualistic; they did, however, need to confront a new existential situa-

[1] Eisenstadt (1986), 1.

tion. The concept of salvation became central in the Western religions; this is most probably the case in the East as well.[2] Nonetheless, it is obvious that the sole concern of the salvation of the individual was not sufficient. The ideologies in the West were also dominated by an ambition of salvation of society, i.e. to reconstruct society according to a variation of the transcendental ideal. Western religions exhibit a concern for collective units like the people, the Church and states in a way which gives them an accent different from that of Eastern teachings. The new world-views had direct implications on politics, and the salvation of man became intimately connected with the creation of a new society aimed at the welfare of the individual and the reestablishment of harmony between nature and society which had been broken prior to the Axial Age.

One result of the axial dichotomy between the transcendental and mundane is the rise of the concept of history as a unique process. The first to conceive this appear to have been the Israelites in the new mythology of history created by their prophets and thinkers in the Axial Age. This became a prototype for most attempts in the same direction among other peoples and cultures in the West. This mythology is still very much alive and constitutes one of the most decisive of the Axial Age's legacies. It constructs the past as a series of unique events beginning with humanity in a paradisiac state destroyed due to revolts against the divine order. This mythology thus acknowledges the breakdown of an old order even if it does not identify it with the events around 1200 BCE but instead projects it upon primeval times. The present unordered state of the world is then a transitory stage which ultimately will lead to the reestablish-

[2] One looks in vain in Mediterranean and the Near Eastern Bronze Age sources for the concern about the individual that is prevalent in the literature of Greece and Israel. The new attitude is stated in a paradigmatic way in Ezechiel 18. It is also clear that the entire idea of the immortality of the soul conceived by the Greeks, as it is manifest in Plato's anthropology, reflects a revolutionary new view of the individual which would have been very alien to earlier ages. One might compare this with a more traditional view in e.g. Qohelet 3:19-21 and many other testimonies. Even in Israel transcending individual death through resurrection became a basic concept, very much in opposition to the traditional one. The large group of Axial Age political and cultural personalities still with us as individuals, and recognizable as unique characters (Greek philosophers, Israelite prophets, literary figures in both literatures), attests to a discovery of the individual. We remember no great literary personalities or preachers from Bronze Age Greece or Egypt.

ment of the original and divine world order and as such the abolition of the dichotomy between the transcendental and mundane. The mythology of Israel and its successors thus introduced cosmic eschatology and became future-oriented to an extent which we do not find in the myths and thoughts of the Bronze Age. The restoration of the world to its former state, a revolution in the proper sense of the word, is envisaged as a cataclysmic event when the forces of evil increase and trigger direct divine intervention in the historical process. This intervention will restore the original order, *apokatástasis tôn pántôn*. In the literature of Israel we can observe how this concept evolved from the idea of the restoration of Israel itself, in some of the earlier prophets, e.g. Amos 8, to the vision of establishing the rule of Israel's God over the entire transformed world as told by the great poems of e.g. Ezekiel 37-40, Isaiah 24-27, 40-66 and Zechariah 9-12.

This vision of history did not remain limited to Israel. Similar ideas existed in the Hellenistic world by the third century BCE; the possibility exists that there was influence from the Middle East although without any apparent inspiration from Israel. Both in Israel and in the Hellenistic world there were ideas that the great change could or should be effected by direct human action, i.e. by revolutionary activism. In Hellenism we know that an attempt at this was made in the second century BCE. At this time a powerful wave of social unrest swept through the Hellenistic world that by the middle of the century generated a slave revolt in Sicily as well as the movement around the Gracchi in Rome and the revolt of Aristonicus in Pergamon.[3] The fear of revolution was in fact widely spread in the Hellenistic world in these centuries.[4] It can be argued that this was one of the main factors behind the acceptance of Roman rule in the eastern Greek-speaking Mediterranean and consequently a cornerstone of the Roman Empire in the East.[5]

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[3] For information about the social and economic background of the events the best reference remains Rostovtzeff (1941), 807 ff.

[4] Classic statements in Tarn (1952), 122-25.

[5] The repeated Roman proclamation of Greek cities' freedom in Asia Minor was a confirmation of the existing order in these cities, which implies that oligarchic rule was opposed by the Aristonicus movement, cf. Magie (1950), 111-18, 147-54. In the conflicts in Judaea in the first century CE the common interests of the ruling aristocracy and the Romans against the revolutionaries are well documented, cf. Horsley (1986), 175-76.

We have some knowledge about the ideology behind this movement in Hellenism. In Pergamon we know that the revolutionaries were called heliopolitans, "citizens of the *polis* of the Sun".[6] In Sicily the leader, Eunus, claimed legitimacy through the Syrian Goddess. The dream of a Utopia protected by the God of Justice identified with the Sun God, Helios, who is worshipped in an ideal society, governed by the Sun, was formulated by Euhemerus and Iambulus in the third century BCE. It has been assumed that the revolutionaries in Sicily and Pergamon as well as some figures around the Gracchi brothers were influenced by the ideology proclaimed by the two authors.[7] The fascinating background for all this cannot be given here. It can be presumed that the two authors, as well as the revolutionaries, represented expressions of a solar ideology rooted in the Middle East, developed in the Achaemenid age and established in Syria during the Seleucid monarchy. This had its first substantial effect upon the West during this era.[8] It would not be the last. Many centuries later, the solar ideology was employed by the Roman Empire itself, proclaimed the legitimacy of imperial power; and its main festival, the birthday of the *Sol invictus*, is, with some adjustment of the mythology, still celebrated in large parts of the world.[9] These movements exhibit interesting parallels with Israel in their view

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[6] Strabo 14.1.38

[7] The texts of these two authors are preserved only in an abbreviated form in Diodorus Siculus' *Bibliotheca* 2.55-60 (Iambulus) and 5.41-46, 6.1 (Euhemerus). The classic description of both is in Rohde (1914) 236-60. For the account of the revolt on Sicily, see Diodorus 34.2. One of the central figures around Tiberius Gracchus, the philosopher Blossius, later joined Aristonicus in Pergamon, see Dudley (1941).

[8] The picture of Aristonicus as a kind of a Hellenistic socialist revolutionary, a Marxist two millennia before Marx, directly inspired by his reading of Iambulus as presented by von Pöhlmann (1925) and Tarn (1952) loc. cit. has been rejected by subsequent scholarship. Nevertheless, the notice in Strabo about the Heliopolitans remains, and an oriental ideological connection is likely, cf. Bömer (1990), 170-72.

[9] I intend to explore the oriental background of this ideology in a forthcoming study. There has been a long debate about the true nature of the Pergamene revolt; some claim Aristonicus was also a radical social reformer, others see him as a pretender to the throne in Pergamon using the oppressed strata of Pergamene society for his own power interests, see Vavřínek (1975) for a good survey of the discussion. It should be noted that absolute monarchic power and radical social reform were not mutually exclusive in antiquity. Despotic kingship arose in the Orient as a means of creating social justice and it is natural that radical social reformers would turn to the despotic ideology as a foundation for the ideal society. The adoption of this ideology by the Roman emperors in the third century CE (Nero was, in

on history insofar as they envisioned the establishment of an ideal society as a return to primeval conditions which were described by Hesiod as the Golden Age. The goal of the revolutionaries was thus the end of history, just like the prophets and poets of Israel.

Two "schools" can be recognized among the reform ideologies developed in the Axial Age: the activist one represented by the Heliopolitans, and the quietist one represented by mainstream of Judaism and Christianity. The activist program did, however, play an important role in Judaism especially before the destruction of the Second Temple. It had revealed itself in the Maccabaean uprising of the 160s BCE and brought final disaster in the Great Revolt in 66-73 CE.[10] Before this, the activist attitude played a crucial role in the religious and political development of Palestinian Judaism.[11] Unlike that of their pagan contemporaries in Asia Minor the Jewish ideology is well documented in contemporary sources.[12] A current idea was that the redemption of the world would be brought about through concrete political and military action by the believers themselves. The use of violence by the believers defending divine law and the institutions of Israel would trigger divine interven-

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fact, their predecessor) confirms this tradition. The main conflict in antiquity was not between despotic rule and democracy but between oligarchy creating social and economic injustice and despotism which was seen as the means of creating an absolutely just society by transferring all legitimate power to one individual who would stand above all particular interests. The local oligarchs, especially the Greeks, based as they were in the *polis* system, used the freedom and democracy argument in their struggle against the despots, as shown by Demosthenes, Cicero and many others. But it is obvious that the *polis* did not possess nor was it even interested in a social justice along the lines of the one propagated by the revolutionaries—and the despotic ideology. See further Delplace (1978), 47-8.

[10] See Schürer (1973:II), 400 ff.

[11] The main study is still Hengel (1961) who gives a full presentation of the basic tenets of the activist movements. The ensuing discussion has shown that one should not use the labels "zealots", "sicarians" or "the fourth philosophy" as designations for the whole movement. These terms stand for smaller sects and groups which followed the activist ideal. The ideals themselves had a larger following. Hengel was criticized for seeing the Zealots as a designation for a political party which was the main carrier of the activist ideology, cf. Smith (1971). His description of the activist ideology is, however, still valid.

[12] Hengel (1961), 235-315. It is worth stressing that the activist ideology is not limited to sources connected directly with the groups that initiated the revolt in 66 CE. We find ample traces of it elsewhere, eg. in the Book of Jubilees (23:27 ff.), one of the oldest intertestamental texts, and in the War scroll from Qumrān which is a very explicit document.

tion which would establish "the Kingdom of Heaven" on earth. The activist tendency never completely vanished in either Jewish or Christian tradition but on the whole the ideological heritage of the Axial Age was cultivated in peaceful circles. This was a central impetus for their spread, and in the long run, the transformation of society and government in Rome.

The proclamation of the Cult of the *Sol invictus* as the state ideology of the Roman Empire in the late third century CE reveals that the ideas reflected in the works of Euhemerus and Iambulus had not become obsolete. The activist strain was also remembered in Israel and remained there a potential possibility even if the predominant rabbinic movement took a restrictive stand. The great eschatological vision of history conceived in the Axial Age and the activist attempts to implement it thus lived on even after the Jewish failure in the first century CE and the final victory of the absolutist Empire from the fourth century onwards, which, at least ideologically, tried to establish a synthesis absorbing the revolutionary ideology. But this fact should then be combined with another. The eschatological *apokatastasis*-vision did combine on one more occasion with an activist movement. This resulted in a tectonic shift in history, the shockwaves of which are still with us. In order to understand this we should examine the Arabian peninsula which according to the textbooks did not play any great role in ancient world history.

Fundamental to Arabia's role in world politics in antiquity was the division of the Middle East in Mediterranean and Iranian spheres of influence around 140 BCE as the Seleucid Empire disintegrated.[13] At that point the Middle East had been united under one regime since the time of the Achaemenids.[14] This unification is one of the most remarkable political features of the so-called Axial Age. After 140 BCE a border was established between a Hellenistic-Roman and an Iranian sphere where Syria belonged to the former, Mesopotamia to the latter. The border between them existed for 700 years and the political relations between the superpowers could be characterized as a stalemate. Arabia was potentially a deployment zone for the main powers, even if the catastrophic Roman expedition to South Arabia in 24 BCE clearly demonstrated the difficulties for

[13] For the following sketch, see Retsö (1993).

[14] The unification of the core area, Mesopotamia and Syria had already been initiated by the Assyrians at the end of the eighth century BCE.

ancient warfare techniques in the Arabian environment.[15]

The restoration of the two superpowers in the third century CE increased the pressure on Arabia as both had expressed their growing interest in acquiring allies among the natives of the Peninsula. The Romans were particularly active in dispatching agents, propagandists and Christian missionaries. These were successful on the African side of the Red Sea where the king of Axum accepted Christianity around 340 CE. On the other side, however, they failed. A reaction against this increased pressure from the north was the political unification of South Arabia by the Himyarite dynasty around 270 CE which, characteristically enough, sought contacts with the arch-enemy of Rome, the Iranian court in Ctesiphon.[16]

It should be emphasized that the pre-Islamic Himyarite Kingdom was a true empire. It was earlier known in the classical Arabic literature as a "fairy-tale" kingdom. In historical scholarship it was noticed and classified as a political organization comparable with the Kingdom of the Lakhmids in al-Ḥīra in Iraq, that of the Ghassanids in Syria or the Kingdom of Kinda in Central Arabia during the last pre-Islamic century. These are also often mentioned in the later Arabo-Islamic literature and played a great role in the development of pre-Islamic Arabic culture. As far as Ghassān and al-Ḥīra are concerned it is clear that they were not independent powers on their own. They were the agents and prolonged arms of the great empires: Rome and Iran.[17] But the Himyaritic Empire was different. As a matter of fact, the kingdom of Kinda was the prolonged arm of the kings of Himyar in Arabia, thus a client state like al-Ḥīra and Ghassān.[18]

One of the greatest discoveries in Middle Eastern history during the last century is that of the culture of ancient South Arabia. The existence of this culture has been known since the middle of the nineteenth century when written texts were discovered by different Western travelers and scholars. These texts, almost all epigraphic, contain references to kings, kingdoms and events in South Arabia

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[15] For further information about this enterprise see Retsö (2002).

[16] A detailed study of the unification and its local background is Bāfaqıh (1990). See also Robin (1996b) 1139-140.

[17] For the history of al-Hīra we are still dependent upon Rothstein (1899). For Ghassān and their predecessor in Syria see Shahid's monumental work *Byzantium and the Arabs*.

[18] For the history of Kinda see Robin (1996a).

dating from the eighth century BCE. However, it had long been difficult to establish a coherent picture of the history of the country due, among other things, to the difficulties of reliably dating the texts.

Archaeological investigations in South Arabia which, after a few pioneering attempts, were systematically initiated in the 1970s by French, German, Soviet, American and Italian teams, contributed significantly to our knowledge of the history of this region. We now know that a culture based on very special domestic irrigation technology was established in South Arabia already during the third millennium BCE, i.e. almost two millennia before the appearance of written records. It has become evident during the last decade that South Arabia was an independent high culture comparable with those of Mesopotamia, Syria and Egypt. The reappearance of this great culture is one of the greatest discoveries in Middle Eastern archaeology in the twentieth century and is of crucial importance for an understanding of the so-called Axial Age and its aftermath.[19]

The Himyarite Empire was the heir of preceding kingdoms in South Arabia, whose history is documented in the inscriptions from around 700 BCE. We can now say that Himyarite rulers, unlike their predecessors, took part in world politics during Late Antiquity considering themselves equal to the rulers of Rome and Iran.[20] But the

[19] There is still no comprehensive and detailed monograph on the entire history of pre-Islamic Arabia, although Hoyland (2001) represents a significant advance. For South Arabia in particular, see Schippmann (1998), a good survey although not based on reading of the original sources, and de Maigret (1996), good on the archaeological background and its relations to the history constructed from the original texts. A first-class presentation of all aspects of the history of the most important pre-Himyarite South-Arabian kingdom is Robin (1996b). An up-to-date study on the kingdom of Himyar does not exist. On may consult Hoyland, op. cit. 46-57. Older studies (see Schippmann op. cit.) tend to be quite technical with extensive discussions of complicated chronological issues most of which have been solved using new epigraphic data.

[20] That they saw themselves as equals to the superpowers in the north is evident in their ideological claims and evidenced by the adoption of an independent monotheistic religion in ca. 370 CE. In this respect they probably followed their rivals on the other side of the Bāb al-Mandab who had similar ambitions, clearly visible in the relevant chapters of the *Kebra nagast*, the Ethiopian "Glory of Kings". The book, which in the form it appears today was probably written around 1300 CE, is based on earlier versions dating back to the sixth and seventh centuries CE. In this work, the world is governed by three powers: Rome, Iran and Ethiopia, a political scenario that hardly can have been conceived in the end of the thirteenth century but well suits the situation at the time of the rise of Islam. To this comes the fact that the Jews are the main enemy in the *Kebra nagast*, behind whom most likely we should find the Judaizing/Jewish Himyarite Empire. Whether the mili-

decisive effect of this major discovery is that we now, for the first time, have the possibility of grasping one of the great mysteries of world history: the rise of Islam and the Arab world conquest.

This new Arabian Empire grew in importance during the two centuries following the unification of South Arabia. At that time, both Rome and Iran were occupied with their troublesome northern neighbors, Germans, Turks and Huns. In their absence the Himyarites extended their influence over the Arabian Peninsula until clashing with the Romans around 500 CE in southern Syria.[21] The Romans had no interest in a rival power on their southeastern flank. What made things worse was the fact that the Himyarite Empire also was ideologically independent. The old pagan Gods of South Arabia disappear from the inscriptions around 370 CE and are replaced by one new God: RḤMNN, *Raḥmān-an*. According to later Arabic tradition Judaism played a central role and was, at least in the beginning of the sixth century, the official religion of the state explicitly propagated by the king YWSF 'S'R, Yūsuf As'ar, in Arabic tradition known as Dhū Nuwās. It has not been proven but remains very likely that there was some kind of Judaizing religion behind the God RḤMNN, which means that this religion had been official since the end of the fourth century CE.[22] The Romans now took action through their Christian allies in Axum. A major conflict arose between the Christian king in Axum and the Jewish/Judaizing king of Himyar ending with the conquest of the Himyarite Empire by the former in 525 CE.[23] The fall of Himyar, a major event in the history of the sixth century, led to the growing influence of

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tary powers of these two kingdoms on both sides of the Red Sea really could match the armies of Rome and Iran is another matter. As will be shown in this paper the test was actually performed in the 630s.

[21] See Shahid (1989), 217-131; Robin (1996b), 1140; id. (1996a).

[22] This God is invoked even in inscriptions from the last, Jewish/Judaizing period which makes it likely that he is identical with "The God of Heaven and Earth" who is invoked by the Jewish king. Thus in the inscription Jamme 1028, the king invokes both "God, to whom belong Heaven and Earth" as well as RHMNN and they are obviously identical. The latter is invoked by the king's officer in the inscription Ryckmans 508 (l. 11). There is still no modern study of the *Rahm'n*-religion in Himyar, but see in general Beeston (1984a, 1984b), Müller (1991) especially 309-10; Robin (1991), 144 ff.; id. (1996b), 1190-192.

[23] No modern monograph summarizes these dramatic events in detail. The most comprehensive discussion is Shahid (1971), see especially 233-76 although the debate on chronology persists, cf. Müller (1991), 312-16; Robin (1996b), 1141-142; Hoyland (2001), 51-5 quotes the sources.

the main rival of the Romans in Arabia, Iran.[24] Iranian dominance in Arabia increased during the sixth century culminating in the re-establishment of the Himyarite dynasty by Iran in 570 CE. This Dynasty would obediently serve Iran's rulers.[25] A few years later Yemen was made an Iranian province. Then in 610 Iran was able to break through the Roman *limes* in Syria to occupy Syria, Anatolia and Egypt. The entire Middle East, including most parts of Arabia, was now under Iranian control.

The only part of Arabia not under Iranian domination at the beginning of the seventh century was Ḥiǧāz. Here events of utmost importance occurred in the shadow of Iranian hegemony.[26] It is worth pointing out that the Islamic movement originally involved very small groups of people from quite insignificant tribes in Western Arabia.[27] This is clearly visible even in the legendary traditions about the career of Muhammad. Even more important is the fact that the movement around the Prophet was pro-Roman in Iranian dominated surroundings.[28] This makes it very likely that the rise of

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[24] This has not been judiciously studied but is a basic observation when reading the later Arabic narratives of the last pre-Islamic century, the so-called *'ayyām*-literature. If taken together, these texts give a very clear impression of a growing Iranian interference in Arabian affairs, mostly via their client kings in *al-Ḥīra* in Iraq. This picture is particularly interesting, as the aim of the texts is not to tell political history but to propagate the virtues and deeds of individual pre-Islamic heroes. The political information stand as remarks *en passant* in these stories. This speaks for their historic value, they are all the more convincing as they offer a coherent picture that corresponds with what is known from other, contemporary sources, cf. Donner (1981), 44-8. The main work on the *'ayyām*-literature is still Caskel (1931).

[25] Shahid (1995), 364-72.

[26] A classic reading of the rise of Islam in Western scholarship is to be found in Watt (1953 and 1956). Since then, a dramatic reorientation has been initiated by Crone/Cook (1977). Even if many of the quite extreme claims in that work have not been accepted, it has inspired a reevaluation of the events. Thus both the religious and economic-social conditions in *Ḥiǧāz,* described by Watt appear to have been quite different from what was imagined: Mecca was no commercial center (Crone 1987), the preaching of the Prophet was not directed against traditional Arabian polytheism (Hawting 1999) etc. Cf. the survey of the discussion in Peters (1994), 257-68, whose presentation otherwise is closer to Watt than to Crone. Its main merit is the extensive quotation of the Islamic sources. The same holds for Lings (1983), paraphrasing the sources, a method which automatically reproduces the views and attitudes of the sources themselves.

[27] Watt (1956), 78-142, 238-49.

[28] Cf. sura 30:1 which promises victory over the Romans as a sign of God's power and mercy, Watt (1988), 13-14. This is supported by the legend of how

the early Islamic movement in Hiğāz should, among other things, be seen as a reaction against the Iranian supremacy in Arabia. The culmination of this seems to have been the clash between the Muslims and some of the Jewish tribes in Medina, where the latter could have been seen as the prolonged arm of Iranian interests in accordance with the traditional Jewish pro-Iranian/anti-Roman attitude.

But the scenario was to change drastically. In the 620s the Romans launched a counteroffensive under the Emperor Heraclius and decisively crushed the proud Iranian Empire. The political scene in the Orient had changed completely. Now the Romans had the upper hand. It is then remarkable that perhaps already in the year after Heraclius' triumph Muslims clashed with Roman troops for the first time at Mu'ta, now in southern Jordan. From then on the ambition of the Muslim State was to conquer Syria, i.e. the heartland of Roman power in the Orient.[29]

What had happened? Why did the young Islamic state attack the sole remaining superpower? What could the small tribes in Western Arabia expect to gain from such an enterprise and why had Islam changed its sympathies as it seems completely? It should be stated clearly that this constitutes one of the greatest mysteries of world history. Traditional explanations like the eternal pressure of nomads to settle and/or plunder, or the trading ambitions of the Quraysh in Mecca are definitely unsatisfactory. It is symptomatic that modern scholarship seems to shun from even posing the question as to why the peoples of Arabia attacked the Roman Empire. This was an enterprise that from the perspective of current scholarship of the Muslims as traditional Bedouin now enflamed by religious fervor, still seems to be a completely absurd project from a military viewpoint.[30] And the most remarkable fact is that there is nothing in the

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some Muslims quit Mecca around 615 and sought refuge with the Christian king of Ethiopia, Watt (1953), 109-17, Peters (1994), 173-76.

[29] For the political situation cf. Donner (1981), 99-101. There is no doubt that the original goal was Syria, cf. Donner (1981), 101 ff. Tradition says that Muhammad himself initiated the military operations northwards, Watt (1956), 343; Lings (1983), 316-22 and Peters (1994), 228-33. The operations in Mesopotamia seem to have been a side-effect, mainly because Mesopotamia was the traditional razzia-ground for the tribes of Central and Eastern Arabia which after Heraclius' victory lay open to invaders, cf. Donner (1981), 217-18. There is no prophetic sanction in the tradition for attacks against Mesopotamia.

[30] The conventional image of commercial power of Quraysh in the day of the Prophet has been definitively annihilated by P. Crone (1987), cf. Peters (1994),

Qur'ān about an attack on Rome, let alone about world conquest. There is much talk about warfare in the Holy Book but even the Islamic exegesis admits that it deals with the conflicts at the time of the Prophet. Not even the Islamic scholars have found any qur'ānic saying explicitly ordering the conquest. The reasons behind these conquests, undoubtedly one of the greatest and most decisive military enterprises in world history with enormous consequences for its later course, thus remain unexplained. The enormous outburst of military, religious and political energy from an hitherto unknown Arabia has baffled historians. No plausible explanation has been proposed.

The first modern scholar to confront this problem anew was P. Crone who in a much discussed work tried to see an ideological motif behind at least the initial phase of the conquest.[31] According to Crone, Islam was originally a Judaizing messianic movement in Arabia whose explicit goal was the conquest of Palestine and the restoration of Jewish worship there. The problem with this hypothesis was that it was founded upon a hypercritical attitude towards the later Arabo-Islamic sources together with great confidence in the contemporary mostly Christian and Jewish ones. The argumentation remained doubtful due to the problematic nature of the sources, which was not confronted. This was combined with the improbable supporting hypotheses, claiming–among other things–that much of the Qur'ān is a late seventh century falsification.

This notwithstanding, Crone's challenging views on the origins of Islam contain many very valuable observations which should not be ignored. The possibility remains likely that Islam in its initial phase

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72-5. It was still maintained by Donner (1981), 96-7. He also assumed an ambition to unite "all the nomads of Arabia" (ibid. 98). For a critical assessment of the "Bedouin argument" in general cf. Donner (1981), 1-49 good statement of the traditional views; Watt (1988), 15-26, 81; see Retsö (2003), 105-08, 113-16. Hodgson (1974), 187-210, argued that since military government was the only legitimate rule known in Arabia, anyone succeeding Muhammad would have to act thusly. After Islam basically had abolished internal warfare in Arabia, expansion was a logical step. He was supported by Kennedy (1986), 59. The argument is ingenious and undoubtedly has some relevance but the support in the sources is meager to say the least. Above all it does not explain the *Drang nach Syrien,* cf. Kennedy (1986), 66. Behind this view lies the idea of the early Islamic state as similar to a large Bedouin tribe, thus ignoring the strong Yemeni presence. Donner, like Crone, assumes the religious status of Palestine as one of the main factors, Donner (1981), 97, cf. his discussion 267-71.

[31] Crone and Cook (1977).

was something quite different from what it later became and also something very different from the image this phase would later create. The ideological motif deserves consideration even if Crone's original suggestion now appears less likely. In the following a somewhat different suggestion will be made, which, if confirmed, would explain a number of the events discussed by Crone.

Following the ideological path suggested by Crone, it will be argued that the key to the understanding of these dramatic events, in many ways the *grande finale* of the so-called Axial age, is to be found in South Arabia, its relations with other powers and its spiritual and material history during the last pre-Islamic millennium. The Arabic Empire thus acquires a plausible and substantiated pre-history which is no longer an airy romantic hypothesis, or based on general assumptions of eternal conflicts between nomads and settlers.

The first observation is that the most significant shift in the policy of the Islamic State seems more or less to coincide with the entry of Yemen into the movement. Yemen was formally still under an Iranian governor but seems to have become more independent during the second decade of the seventh century. The collapse of the Sassanian State in 626 left the Iranians in Yemen free to do whatever they pleased. In 630 the Muslims won their first real military victory at Ḥunayn where tribes who were the traditional enemies to the Yemenis were defeated.[32] It was in this context that the leaders in Ṣanʿāʾ sought closer contacts with the government in Medina. It should be observed that this act resulted in what can be seen as the restoration of the Himyarite Empire. Arabia was again united as the tribes of Eastern and Central Arabia now joined Islam. And the restored Empire had its own ideology which was distinct from Christianity. The entity ruled by Muhammad during his last years was thus nothing new. Muhammad was not the first to unite Arabia. He is a direct heir of the Himyarite Empire.

[32] In Islamic history the great battle is, of course, the one at Badr south of Medina in 624 CE. This was the first victory of the Muslims over an enemy and it was accorded status similar to that of the Exodus from Egypt for the Israelites. From a military viewpoint, however, the sources present it as quite an insignificant skirmish, involving some 350 Muslims fighting against 950 Meccans, Watt (1956), 10. The same sources give numbers around 20 000 warriors in the army confronting the Muslims at Ḥunayn which is a number similar to those figuring in the later conquest, Watt (1956) 70-3. Even if the numbers are uncertain, the tradition portrays the Ḥunayn-battle in dimensions quite different from that of Badr, Bolshakov (1989) 163-66).

The second observation is that the Yemenis played a significant role following the conquests. This is a phenomenon which has received little attention in scholarship.[33] The main actors in the Muslim army until the beginning of the reign of Muʿāwiya were Yemenis judging from their names, and they played a leading role in the army in Syria.[34] Yemenis dominated the victorious army at Yarmuk in 636, where the Roman army was vanquished.[35]

The Yemeni presence in the Islamic army must have been of great importance for the Muslims as a whole: the movement was no longer a loose alliance of small tribes from Ḥiğāz but represented a continuation of Yemen's splendid past, an Empire which had been indigenous, ideologically independent and which had acted on equal terms with the main powers in the north. It can be suspected that the Yemenis must have appreciated the story in sura 27 of the Qurʾān about how the queen of Sheba, explicitly identified as a Yemeni, had become a Muslim in the days of Sulaymān.[36] The Qurʾān gave them a great predecessor and it can be speculated if not this text in fact stands there with exactly this purpose: to attract the Yemenis to the new movement.

In 525 the Romans had revealed their thoughts about a rival empire in Arabia. Undoubtedly, another conflict was approaching after Heraclius' victory and the restoration of the Empire in Arabia. The great clash occurred at Yarmuk in August 636 where the Yemenis took their revenge for what had happened in 525.

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[33] See Madʾaj (1988), 234-36 and passim; Kennedy (1986), 61. The traditional presentation of the earliest history of Islam usually concentrates on the relation between the state in Medina and the large tribes of Central and Eastern Arabia because they loom large in the sources and also were the ones who later assumed power in the Islamic empire, reducing the others (Ḥiğāzis and Yemenis) to a secondary position. The literature is extensive, the classic being Wellhausen (1902). Of more modern works Shaban (1971) is somewhat one-sided) and Rotter (1982), 1-36, provides solid argumentation from the sources. An excellent and thorough study of the period 570 to 696 which deserves more recognition is Bolshakov (1989-2000). For the rivalry among the tribes see ʿAbd Dixon (1971), 83 ff. The basic work on the earliest phase of the conquests is Donner (1981).

[34] Madelung (1986), 1-3.

[35] Madʾaj (1988), 69-71; Donner (1981), 133 names the participating tribes.

[36] One should compare the picture of Saba in sura 34:15-21 where they are said to have perished because of disbelief just like many other pre-Islamic people in the Qurʾānic account. The story in sura 27:20-44 is quite different, making Saba believers in the monotheistic message. The contrast is striking and could well be the result of a reorientation of the views of the early Muslims due to closer contacts with Yemenis.

The history of the early Islamic state shows how its rulers from Muʿāwiya (661-80) onwards tried to control the Yemeni influence and how their influence was gradually reduced.[37] In spite of this, they have a curiously strong position in the early Islamic traditions which does not correspond with what we know about them from the later Umayyad age. The tradition still says that the Arabs are divided in two main branches: the real Arabs i.e. the Yemenis and the arabicized Arabs, i.e. the others including the Prophet's own tribe.[38] In the same fashion, the Arabic language is said to have first been given to the Yemenis and then learnt by the patriarch of the northern tribes, Ismaʿīl, who had to marry into the Yemeni tribes in order to learn it.[39] These are strange blocks of tradition, without any ideological signification in classic Islamic dogma or later history in which Yemen has played no significant role, but which since very early times have not been really questioned. This shows that they must represent a very early pro-Yemeni stratum in the Islamic historiographic tradition which later times could not obscure.

The most spectacular remnants of Yemeni early Islam are perhaps the apocalyptic visions, documented in a book called *Kītāb al-fitan* "The Book of Trials", which was published not too many years ago.[40] The book is attributed to Nuʿaym b. Ḥammād (842 or 844 CE), a well-known traditionalist of Khurasanian extraction. It contains many prophecies about what is to happen in the end of days. Some of them are obviously formulated in the early Abbasid Period, i.e. after 750 CE but most of them are attributed to authorities with Yemeni names living in the Umayyad Period.[41] This Yemeni stratum in the *Kītāb al-fitan* represents quite an early tradition. The collection of Yemeni lore by Nuʿaym was not an isolated phenom-

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[37] Cf. Rotter, loc. cit.

[38] First documented in Ibn Isḥāq's history of the Islamic State. The passage is copied from a work by Wahb b. Munabbih writing in the first decade of the eighth century CE and is also found in a digest of Wahb's work by Ibn Hishām, *Kītāb at-tīğān*. Wahb is the earliest historiographer in Islam. For this issue and references to the sources, see Retsö (2003), 30-40.

[39] This is also found in the *Kītāb at-tığān* going back to Wahb b. Munabbih. For details and references to sources, see Retsö (2003), 34-40.

[40] By S. Zakkār, Damascus. The edition is undated and not of the best quality. There are at least three manuscripts preserved plus quotations in other texts. A new critical edition is being prepared by L. Conrad, Hamburg. A thorough presentation of the text and its contents was given in Madelung (1986).

[41] Madelung (1986), 144.

enon in the early Abbasid Age. There are several other texts containing Yemeni traditions which are probably compiled in this period.[42] When Ibn Hishām, in the beginning of the ninth century CE, made his revised edition of Ibn Isḥāq's biography of the Prophet and created the standard work for the then emergent orthodox movement, he excluded most of the Yemeni material that was included in Ibn Ishāq' original work. This material came primarily from Wahb b. Munabbih's work at the outset of the eighth century. Hie did, however, publish a special edition of Wahb's traditions published as the *Kitāb at-tīğān,* "The Book of Crowns", which shows that, in spite of the skepticism from more orthodox circles about the value of the Yemeni traditions, there was an interest in it. Like Ibn Hishām, Nuʿaym was an orthodox traditionalist but like his colleague he also found it worthwhile to preserve the Yemeni views that were excluded from the now emerging sharʿī-movement, the predecessor of later Sunnism.

The *Kitāb al-fitan* is very pro-Muʿāwiya and there is no enmity towards the Qays tribes. The Yemenis are still defined as the pure Yemeni tribes not including the Arab tribes in Syria which is the commonly accepted pattern in classical Islamic genealogy. The battle of Marğ Rāhiṭ in 684 CE when the alliance between Yemenis and Syrian tribes was established which generated the lasting enmity against Qays is not mentioned. All these details indicate that the basic Yemeni stratum in the text goes back to the Yemeni authorities who were active in the Yemeni center in Ḥimṣ in Syria in the time of Muʿāwiya, to whom they were the primary support, i.e. before 680 CE.[43] We are thus back in the age of the first great Islamic conquests.

This Yemeni apocalypse proclaims the rise of a *mahdī*, a Messiah from Yemen in the end of days, a tradition which is also sporadically noted in other more orthodox texts. A great final battle be-

[42] Among these are the *ʾAkhbār mulūk Ḥimyar,* "The Stories of the Kings of Himyar", ascribed to Muʿāwiya's court-historian ʿUbayd b. Shariya, the *Wasāyā al-mulūk* "The Wills of the Kings", ascribed to the poet Diʿbil al-Khuzāʿī, the *Tarīkh al-ʿarab qabla l-islām,* "The History of the Arabs before Islam", ascribed to al-ʾAsmaʿī, and several others. All these works are pseudepigraphs ascribed to well-known writers compiled in the decades around 800 CE. In general, this literature has been neglected not only in Sunni Islam but also in Western scholarship which long, and to an astonishing degree, accepted the Sunni Islamic view on historiography. Madelung's article is in many ways a rediscovery of an important piece of very early Arabic literature.

[43] Cf. Madelung (1986), 179-80.

tween the Muslims led by the Yemenis, and the Roman Empire is envisaged followed by the final conquest of Constantinople. Interesting is that also two Israelite tribes are said to take part in the final eschatological battle. The Yemeni presence in Syria is seen as the final preparation for the Great Battle just as the Muslim community in Medina was a preparation for the conquest of Mecca.

The details of the *Kītāb al-fitan* cannot be presented here.[44] But the existence of a great Yemeni apocalyptic vision of this kind, obviously conceived in the seventh century, makes incumbent a review of the text's ideological background and its connections with the actual events.

Let us first remember that the fall of the Judaizing/Jewish Himyarite Empire in 525 CE was articulated in terms of an ideological conflict between Christianity and Judaism. There is also clear evidence that the Himyarites already before Islam were identified with Sheba in the Bible.[45] In the Old Testament several passages ascribe an eschatological role to Sheba. They include Psalm 72:9 and Isaiah 60:1-11: The Kings of Arabia and Sheba will offer gifts to the King of Israel in the End of Days and Sheba will come to Jerusalem with gold, frankincense and myrrh and innumerable camels and pay honor to the King of Israel. It is very unlikely that the Himyarites when converting to Judaism did not esteem these statements, although we have no contemporary documents from South Arabia which say they did. But we only need to cross over to Africa to find such interpretation of the Scriptures by the Christian kings of Axum who claimed descent from Solomon and the Queen of Sheba.[46] The Sheba syndrome obviously played an important role for the rulers in the Red Sea area in this period. Sheba had in Christian tradition become the symbol of the righteous gentiles who join the true

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[44] Madelung's article should be consulted.

[45] The earliest instance is Philostorgius, *Historia ecclesiastica* p. 32 written in the beginning of the fifth century.

[46] The role of this mythology in Ethiopia in the fifth and sixth centuries is much debated. The main document, the *Kebra nagast* "The Glory of Kings", a kind of national Ethiopian epic is said to have been written in the beginning of the fourteenth century. There are, however, many arguments supporting the assumption that the main contents are derived from a text written in the sixth or seventh century; see the main studies of Hubbard (1956) and Shahid (1976). See also Müller, (1991), 315. Grierson and Munro-Hay (1999), 236-39, 268-74 have a good section of the vicissitudes of the *Kebra nagast*. Their skepticism about the age of its content is based on some sound arguments but still not totally convincing.

faith and is in the Gospel given an eschatological role.[47] It is obvious that for Ethiopian Christianity, which has always been strongly influenced by Old Testament and Jewish tradition, identification with Biblical Sheba was a means of Biblical legitimization and to become closely associated with Israel. The tradition in the *Kebra nagast* is a clear testimony of this. When the identification with Sheba had occurred, the new Sheba also took over the eschatological sayings in the Old Testament about its role in the end of days. It would have been extremely remarkable, to say the least, if a Jewish regime in Yemen, the ancient homeland of Sheba, had not adopted the same Biblical legitimization.

Admittedly we move onto unknown territory when trying to piece this evidence together. But it is reasonable to imagine how the Christian conquest of Himyar in 525 could have been interpreted by the Judaizing leadership as an attack by the heretics on Israel's most faithful ally, who also, by the way, on good grounds claimed to be the real Sheba. That the whole process stood under divine guidance would, however, have been demonstrated in 570 when the Himyarite dynasty was re-enthroned in Ṣanʿāʾ, now with Iranian help, just as had been done one millennium earlier when Cyrus the Great had initiated the restoration of Israel in the Holy Land. The king installed by the Iranians was Sayf b. Dhī Yazan. He is a figure who has lived on in legends and stories until this day; later generations have not forgotten him. In the great popular epic which has developed over centuries and is known in the entire Arab-speaking world Sayf b. Dhī Yazan is described as the one who leads the warriors of the Religion of Abraham against the heretical troops of the King of Ḥabash (Ethiopia), thus clearly a remnant of ancient ideology.[48]

Sheba accepted Islam in 630 CE. Did it bring with it an anti-Roman messianic ideology developed in pre-Islamic Yemen as the result of the military and ideological conflicts with the Christian

[47] Matthew 12:42; Luke 11:31.

[48] Within this context one should cite a Syriac Christian apocalyptic text probably written around 690, the so-called Pseudo-Methodius Apocalypse. In it the destruction of the kingdom of Ismael is to be effected by the last Christian Emperor, who, in fulfillment of Ps. 68:31, will offer his power to Christ after the defeat of the arch-enemy. The Biblical passage is, in fact, the motto of Christian Ethiopia found already in the *Kebra nagast*, and the Emperor in question is said to be "the son of Kushyat", a descendant of the kings of Kush, i.e. Ethiopia. The apocalypse is in many respects a direct answer to the thoughts of the Yemenis in the *Kitāb-al-fitan*.

Empires which is so well documented? Ample traces of it are to be found in the earliest Islamic attempts at a world history, the books by the Yemeni Wahb b. Munabbih, written in the 720s. If this was the case, the early development of the Islamic movement can be examined from a new perspective. Could it be that the Yemenis with their militant eschatologically motivated ideology of warfare against the arch-enemy and inspired by the age-old Jewish antagonism against Rome, took over the Islamic movement, changing the quietist message of the earliest layers of the Qur'ān into a rallying cry for a troop of enthusiastic warriors aiming at the conquest of Syria, the liberation of Jerusalem, crushing the Roman power and conquering Constantinople? It is worth noting that the main thrusts against Constantinople were made around 670 and 718 when the Yemenis had a decisive influence on the policy of the Islamic State.[49]

This scenario does not fit well with what we know about later Islam. But we must admit that the great Islamic conquests remain a puzzle that lacks a rational explanation. I have suggested such an explanation: a gigantic attempt by an Arabian empire equipped with an outspoken anti-Roman ideology expressed in the eschatological terms inherited from the Axial Age, to take revenge on the Roman Empire. The *Kïtāb al-fitan* is of decisive importance for an understanding of the Islamic project. Here we have the Yemeni interpretation of what took place and its goals. It would also explain why so many elements clearly reflecting the Yemeni ideology remain in the traditional Islamic picture of history. If the Yemeni eschatology was the driving force in the earliest Islamic movement, laying the foundation of the Islamic World Empire, we can explain why their ideology had such a central position and could not be forgotten.

The great attempt failed. The Yemenis were pushed aside along with other groups by the old aristocracy of the Arabian tribes. But it seems, nonetheless, that we stand before the last great attempt to implement the eschatological program conceived many centuries earlier. The initial phase of the Islamic conquest is similar to the Great Jewish Rebellion around 70 CE in combining eschatological expectation with drastic activism in order to achieve its goals. But the Islamic project was on a much grander scale. It was a concrete

[49] Kennedy (1986), 87, 105.

plan to defeat the Romans and to conquer their capital, and the Yemenis were, in fact, quite close to success. This goal was reached 800 years later when the Prophetic *ḥadīth* ascribed to Muhammad that "Constantinople will be conquered by a ruler with a prophet's name" was actually fulfilled. The last and greatest of the eschatological moments of antiquity actually failed to reach its immediate goals, but still managed to change the course of world history. In the West the revolutionary ideology expressed in the cult of the Sun, *Sol invictus*, was absorbed by the empire and transformed according to the interests of its supporters. In the same way, the Islamic revolution headed by the Yemenis was appropriated by the Abbasids in 750, who created an empire formally maintaining the revolutionary ideology but combining it with the ideal of the despotic state just as the Romans had done. We have to wait for the great European revolutions to find a similar combination of revolutionary ideology and activism but now without the overtly religious dimension. The rise of the Islamic world is in fact the result of the greatest attempt ever made to implement one of the basic concepts of the Axial Age: the end of history.

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PART FOUR

INDIAN AND CHINESE PERSPECTIVES

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INTRODUCTION: EXTENDING THE AXIAL MODEL TO SOUTH AND EAST ASIA

JOHANN P. ARNASON, S.N. EISENSTADT AND BJÖRN WITTROCK

Given the European origins and connections of the axial model, applications to the Indian and Chinese cases have always been more tentative. The difficulties encountered in these contexts are related to basic problems of comparative history. On the level of symbolic representations and practices, comparison of religious traditions across the vast cultural distances in question is inseparable from unsettled controversies about the very rationale for a history of religions. The comparative history of philosophy is still an underdeveloped project; the idea of the "three philosophical civilizations" (Greece, India and China) is a very promising guideline, but both the intrinsic difficulty of the subject-matter and the influence of traditions hostile or indifferent to comparative inquiry have impeded progress. As for the institutional dimension, comparative studies of state and empire formation in China, India and the Near Eastern-Mediterranean world—to mention only the aspects most directly relevant to our topic—are still in an early stage.

Comparative analyses of cultural breakthroughs and new beginnings—such as the axial transformation—cannot bypass the self-understandings of the traditions and civilizations to be compared. Retrospective interpretation of axial legacies, whether or not they identify them as epoch-making innovations, must therefore be taken into account and may pose specific problems for critical analysis. As noted in the introduction to the first section, it seems to have been characteristic of the Axial Age in general that an increasing reflexive detachment from traditions was accompanied by emphatic affirmation of traditions articulated in new ways but projected into the past. The relative weight of the two tendencies varies from case to case, and so does the historical content of the traditions in question (the oversimplifying notion of an "invention of tradition" is no

more useful in this context than anywhere else). The traditionalist trends were very pronounced in China and India, but they took significantly different directions. In both cases, the currents that during the Axial Age deviated most markedly from tradition were in the long run marginalized and excluded from the dominant cultural complex; however, the historical dimensions of the two retraditionalizing processes were so different that the parallels may seem tenuous. Mohism disappeared from the shared world of Chinese traditions soon after the foundation of the Empire, had no impact on the civilizational patterns that crystallized within the imperial framework, and did not spread beyond its original homeland (Legalism was, by contrast, adapted to the more central and formative components of a reconstituted mainstream, in such a way that its anti-traditionalist potential was defused). Buddhism became a crucial factor in the development of Indian civilization during its most expansive phase (including a brief but far from insignificant imperial moment), an integral part of the East Asian civilizational complex, and arguably a matrix for a distinctive civilizational pattern in continental Southeast Asia. Its final decline in India coincided with a massive geopolitical and geocultural setback to Indian civilization as a whole.

Conversely, the Chinese and Indian ways (prefigured during the Axial Age) of reaffirming traditional continuity did not follow the same pattern. In China, the most successful contributor and claimant to the axial legacy—the Confucian tradition—set out to restore ancestral pattern which was identified with a known past (the Zhou dynasty) and believed to be built on even older foundations. The breakthrough to better understanding of the experience behind this claim, linked to the rediscovery of the Chinese Bronze Age, should be seen as one of the great achievements of twentieth-century historical research. On the other hand, the Chinese Axial Age became—through this very conflation of its innovations with the restoration of a pre-existing paradigm—a traditional model in its own right, codified in the most authoritative texts of Chinese civilization and providing a hermeneutical anchor for successive innovations. Its centrality to Chinese intellectual and cultural history was striking enough to overshadow the creativity of later periods and inspire a particularly resilient traditionalist vision of the Chinese trajectory, shared by internal and external observers. The Indian mode of idealizing the past from an axial perspective was both more limited

and more absolute within its domain. The focus was on sacred texts inherited from a more archaic age, but endowed with absolute authority and seen as the fountainhead of all subsequent reflection on ultimate realities (the Vedas); this belief was central to classical Hinduism, and later loss of importance was due to ignorance of the supposedly transcendent sources, rather than to articulate rejection.

Visions of the Axial Age are inevitably affected by more directly formative historical experiences, and more structured interpretations of its dynamics and innovations must in turn be confronted with the record of later history; the very idea of axiality implies a logic and a potential that can only be understood in light of long-term developments. Given the specific cultural and ideological obstacles that comparative historical studies of non-European civilizations have had to overcome, the implications of this view for India and China have obviously proved more difficult to trace than within the orbit of Western traditions. Beyond this basic and common problem, however, the two cases are not in the same category. There seems to be more structured disagreement about the patterns and periods of Chinese history. A fundamental distinction between earlier and later phases of imperial history, with the crisis of the T'ang and the rise of the Song seen as the most decisive juncture, is widely accepted, but the nature of the transformations that set the second phase apart from the first is still a matter of controversy; the ascendant phase of the Song dynasty (960-1125) has often—and for a whole range of reasons—been singled out as a particularly formative period, but recent analyses of a much longer "Song-Yuan-Ming transition" (from the early twelfth to the late fifteenth centuries) have raised new questions about the significance of Song beginnings. Last but not least, new perspectives on the *longue durée* have highlighted the close and enduring connection between Chinese and Inner Asian transformations. All these debates have some bearing on the issue of axial legacies in Chinese history. To mention only one crucial example, interpretations of the twelfth-century "Neo-Confucian renaissance"—often regarded as the most important revival of axial ideas in the history of Chinese thought—depend on the broader context which is now being re-examined.

By contrast, the framework for debate on Indian history would seem less clearly defined. The idea of the pre-Islamic "Indian middle ages" as a period with distinctive characteristics and formative trends is a relatively recent development, and it links up with pio-

neering work on the formation of an Indo-Islamic world during the following centuries. A clearer view of these two crucial phases and their interconnections is bound to change the overall picture of Indian history. As for the axial connection, this reinterpretation of the historical context throws new light on the "Hindu renaissance" of the late first millennium CE, its ways of reintegrating a previously more disputed field, and the significance of its triumph over rival traditions of axial origin.

Interpretations of Indian and Chinese history have traditionally stressed the very different modes of civilizational continuity, and although more recent work has to some extent relativized the contrasts, there are still good reasons to distinguish the respective ways of combining cultural patterns and power structures. Although the Chinese tradition of imperial rule was neither as uniform nor as uninterrupted as its Confucian ideologists and their Western interpreters would have it, it embodied a model of sacred rulership that was both unusually resilient and exceptionally central to a whole civilizational framework. In the Indian case, cultural and institutional continuity was much less dependent on political structures. Interstate rivalry heightened by imperial ambitions was a recurrent feature of Indian history, but no imperial vision was canonized at the level of formative tradition; and although Indian kingship was less firmly circumscribed by priestly authority than some influential interpretations of the caste order have suggested, the autonomous ideological power wielded by the Brahmins was clearly more central to civilizational identity.

Two of the following papers deal with different aspects of the Indian case and its significance for a comparative study of axial traditions. David Shulman focuses on the exceptionally central role of reflection on language—and more particularly on grammar—in the whole post-Vedic sequence of civilizational patterns. In the setting of an ontology that had come to emphasize the discontinuity of separate fields, grammar became a medium of reconnection, a bridge between human and divine worlds (as Shulman sees it, it is highly debatable whether the term "transcendence" should be used in this context). But grammar is also "the idiom used for fusing boundaries and determining identities", and at a more ideological level, rival linguistic theories served to articulate disputes and conflicts among different religious communities. In short, grammaticality and alternative ways of understanding it were crucial to the Indian

patterns of axiality; this unique feature is all the more remarkable when set alongside the downgrading of some other themes and spheres (such as the political domain). With reference to earlier interpretations of Vedic sacrificial ritual as a response to a fragmented world, Shulman suggests that Assmann's model of "semantic relocation" might be applicable to the Indian case: the soteriological thrust of the ritual system may have been sublimated into grammatical reflection.

Sheldon Pollock's paper begins with a brief discussion of the tension between historical and typological conceptions of axiality. If we abandon the quest for a clearly demarcated Axial Age and adopt a typological definition, a strong case can be made for early Buddhism as an example of axial cultural orientations. On the other hand, this did not—as the axial model would lead us to expect—translate into corresponding imperial structures. The contradiction between "a religious community that knew no boundaries and polities that always did" suggests that a comparative study of political—and more particularly imperial—patterns might open up new perspectives on the whole axial problematic. Pollock then compares Indian models of imperial rule and rhetoric with Near Eastern and Mediterranean ones (from the Achaemenids to Rome) and concludes that imperial power did not invariably relate to theologies or ideologies of transcendence. There is, in other words, no uniform correlation between axiality and empire. The most interesting and historically significant contrasts between the two imperial traditions have to do with the very definitions of power: from the Achaemenids to the Romans, imperial founders and centres claim universal sovereignty, whereas their Indian counterparts settle for a "finite if large geopolitical frame of reference, beyond which the rule of other powers was acknowledged". As Pollock argues, it would be misleading to describe the two "post-axial empire-forms" as patterns of legitimation: they involve, at a more fundamental level, different articulations of the aims and procedures of imperial rule.

Hsu Cho-yun reconsiders the idea of an axial breakthrough in the light of growing insight into the long-term formation of Chinese culture. It now seems clear that although there were certainly significant intellectual developments in China during a period commonly equated with the Axial Age, this phase also "brought a more than two thousand year long process to fruition", and distinctive features of the pre-axial legacy are essential to the understanding of later

developments. The Shang and Zhou kingdoms had not only established a particularly adaptable model of sacred rulership but also initiated far-reaching rationalizing processes, most importantly those which gave rise to the "mandate of heaven" as a new conception of relations between the human and the supernatural world. The contending schools of the most innovative period—the three or four centuries preceding the completion of imperial unification—transformed the Shang-Zhou legacy in various directions; Hsu suggests that inter-regional divergence and confrontation may have been more important than historians have mostly thought. The most formative current, Confucianism, focused on a more emphatic affirmation of the centrality of human beings. But when the unified empire called for a corresponding cultural synthesis, this approach was integrated into a more comprehensive attempt to "organize the cosmos, the human world, the state and the human body as a coherent whole". The enduring results of this synthesis were to shape China's responses to later intercivilizational encounters.

Christoph Harbsmeier links the question of axial breakthroughs to a broader historical context: the cumulative development and complex interaction of early civilizations from the fourth millennium BCE onwards. Seen against this background, the idea of the Axial Age—a parallel and largely autonomous acceleration of change in a few major civilizational centres—amounts to a more specific hypothesis than overdrawn contrasts with archaic continuity might suggest. Axial transformations can, in other words, only be understood as radicalizing twists to trends that had been at work for a much longer time. Harbsmeier then discusses China as a privileged case, both because its history during the period in question seems to have been more self-contained than developments in other axial centres, and because later innovations in China have—although more diverse and creative than traditional historiography was willing to admit—been disproportionately attuned to the classical age of the first millennium BCE. The issue of intellectual innovations during the Axial Age can be analyzed in terms of five categories: elaboration, explanation, problematization, systematization and relativization. Harbsmeier surveys the evidence of such changes in various fields of knowledge, from cosmology and epistemology to philology and rhetoric, and concludes that striking breakthroughs did indeed occur in many domains, but within an overall pattern of uneven de-

velopment and varying combinations of the five above mentioned processes.

Comparative approaches to axial civilizations have tended to stress the particular continuity of the traditions that go back to the Chinese Axial Age. On the other hand, research on later Chinese history has increasingly and unequivocally shifted the emphasis to transformative dynamics and turning-points. Frederic Wakeman discusses the question of change and continuity, with particular reference to the last major transformation of the Chinese imperial regime: the seventeenth century Ming-Qing transition. This episode has been analysed from various angles: in the context of a more or less worldwide "seventeenth-century crisis", as the last and most stable fusion of Chinese and Inner Asian imperial traditions, or as an adaptation of indigenous bureaucratic patterns to alien rule. Wakeman argues that a closer look at intellectual responses to the crisis which destroyed the Ming dynasty would throw new light on the course of events as well as on the possibilities which may have been foreclosed. A far-reaching rethinking of the Confucian tradition, exemplified by the work of Gu Yanwu and Huang Zongxi, culminated in efforts to sever "the link between transcendent cosmic hierarchies and mundane political institutions", and thus to problematize core components of the Chinese axial legacy. But this new beginning was cut short by the reimposition of orthodoxy in the wake of the Manchu conquest.

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AXIAL GRAMMAR

DAVID SHULMAN

> Grammarians who make sounds
> according to Panini's rules
> have no feeling for God.
> What a waste! They're like the cook
> who makes, with vast effort,
> a dinner of consummate curries
> and then loses his taste.[1]

> Das Mediale, das ist die *Unmittel*barkeit aller geistigen Mitteilung, ist das Grundproblem der Sprachtheorie, und wenn man diese Unmittelbarkeit magisch nennen will, so ist das Urproblem der Sprache ihre Magie.[2]

Was There a Break?

Ancient India has always been a popular member of the axial club, partly, perhaps, because of its very oddity in comparison with more regular members (Greece, Israel, China). It is an honor difficult to resist. Everyone agrees that something very unusual happened in late-Vedic or proto-classical India, and we can certainly speak of a major shift, of a burst of intense creativity, of greater complexity, of the rise of new political structures, of intellectual ferment, of rival elites, of heterodoxies and revolts, and so on. And yet there is something problematic about the prevalent language of rupture, disruption, and breakthrough, to say nothing of notions of "transcendence" and the breakdown of an alleged archaic homology between domains. Such formulations, conspicuous in Jaspers, are strikingly Western—actually Greek—and assume a rather violent progression and a no less

[1] *Visva-gunadarsa-campu* of Venkatadhvarin (1934), 1077.
[2] Benjamin (1988), 11.

pressing ontology of alienation. In such a vision, reflexivity, one of the great axial themes, is inherently divisive, a splitting of and within the reflective self. The mind lifts itself, as it were, out of the enveloping organic web and settles on an imagined Archimedean point somewhere outside the system, whence it can look back (probably downwards) on the still embedded world it has, at no small cost to itself, left behind.

Part of the problem, as far as India is concerned, lies in the initial premise of homology (or, in other words "ontological continuity")[3] within differential cosmic domains. Vedic materials hardly support such a view. Even the supposedly earlier books of the RgVeda reveal a jarring discontinuity between worlds or existential levels, a lack of isomorphism perceived as normative. In this, India hardly stands alone;[4] yet early India may represent a relatively extreme vision of cosmic fragmentation and the need, or longing, for some form of reintegration. The everyday awareness of even as gifted an observer as the poet—before he has taken his draught of Soma—is one of diminished intensity, obscuration, confusion, and displacement. Deeper experience, including access to the world of the gods, is largely, or initially, denied us. Moreover, language itself, as the RgVedic poet says in a famous verse (1.164.45), is hidden from us, so that human beings are reduced to speaking the remaining fragment; the same notion is applied to the presence and accessibility of God (10.90.4), although, as always in India, a certain metaphysical primacy attaches to the linguistic register. For this very reason, my remarks will also focus on linguistics and grammar in the Axial Age. In particular, I would like to ask where language is situated in relation to the various cosmic domains and to the speaking or singing self; what it means to adopt linguistics as the reflexive science par excellence; and how this fascination with the properties of language is linked to other, wider civilizational themes and processes in the final centuries BCE.

Patanjali (second century BCE), whose *Mahabhasya* commentary on Panini's grammatical *sutras*[5] will serve us as our point of departure, an "axial" text par excellence, quotes the above RgVedic verse in his remarkable introduction to the commentary, the *Paspasahnika*,

[3] This term was suggested by Johann Arnason.
[4] See Assmann's paper in this volume, for example.
[5] Composed c. 500 BCE.

where he considers the rationale for studying grammar. There is no doubt that a fractured cosmos, well articulated by the Veda, informs the cosmology within which Patanjali strives to situate grammatical science. He has inherited this fracture from the earliest sources; perhaps grammar, like Vedic ritual, will turn out to be capable of reconnecting the severed worlds. This analogy, incidentally, is very close to the surface of Patanjali's eloquent text. For example, Patanjali mentions, a little further along, the sacrificial pole (*yupa*) that is meant for tying the victim and that is to be made from a log of certain kinds of wood that either is or is not planted erect in the ritual arena (*yat kimcid api kastham ucchrityanucchritya va*). The context has to do with *niyama*, the notion of prescribed restriction within an otherwise open-ended set of options: only certain kinds of wood are allowed, just as in language there are refined or elevated (*samskrta*) forms that exist within the vast set of attested or imagined speech-forms. Such "correct" forms grant speakers certain advantages, just as a ritual, correctly performed, produces definite results. But there is a strong hint in this passage of the inherent difficulty underlying both ritual and linguistic processes: for the *yupa* pole naturally has two ends, and whether it is planted erect or not is no trivial matter. The gods succeeded in going up to heaven by means of the sacrifice, but they were afraid that human beings, and in particular the sages, would follow after them and share their celestial prosperity. So the gods planted the pole upside down in order to hide (*ayopayan*) their tracks from human eyes—and that is why the *yupa* is called *yupa*, an instrument of hiding. [Etymologies are never adventitious.] As it happened, however, human beings came to the place of sacrifice and noticed this upside-down pole, which they then, in an inspired moment, turned right-side up. At that very moment they became capable of perceiving the heavenly world. In fact, this is the real purpose of the *yupa*: it is not merely a matter of tying the victim but rather of piercing the normative occlusion of human perception. When the point is aimed upwards, the world of the gods is revealed along with the point, one might say, of the sacrificial rite.[6]

There is nothing very surprising about any of this. To get from one world to the next, you need sacrifice. These worlds are naturally discontinuous. Such, in fact, is the archaic, primordial cosmic

[6] *tad yad yupa urdhva ni-miyate yajnasya prajnatyai svargasya lokasyanukhyatyai*: *Aitareya Brahmana* 6.1.

order, explicable in various ways according to Vedic and *Brahmana* mythologies. There is nothing romantic about such a cosmos, however "organic" or "whole" it might appear. Human beings are blocked from direct contact with the generative source of their being, and even violent ritual is no guarantee of successful re-connection. The *Brahmana* passage focuses on the path, the bridge to the other world, deliberately obscured by the sacrificing gods; this image should perhaps be studied in relation to the powerful theme of the strangely creative and always proleptic footprints[7] which, in Vedic as in classical India, normally precede, or even generate, the foot. In any case, an unsettling sense of existential rupture is clearly present in our earliest sources.

Jan Heesterman, who most radically applied this kind of language to India, sees the mature Vedic ritual system as embodying a still more extreme form of breakage than ancient Vedic cosmology, with its dangling, disconnected worlds. If heaven and earth are naturally sundered, like pre-articulate and articulate speech, like the devolved human self and the potentially whole divine self, then only a violent act of mental or internal reunification can redeem the Brahmin "who knows thus," and who, in knowing thus, turns his back on the whole of creation.[8] This description certainly has an axial ring to it and embodies deep insight into the historical and intellectual process of systematizing the mature ritual. Yet there may be another way to speak of what happened in North India in the middle of the first millennium BCE.

The Word Revealed

Why grammar? Can we reconstruct the forces that produced the Paninian system and that situated grammar at the heart of the post-Vedic civilizational enterprise? Does the logic articulated by the great grammarians themselves reveal the dynamics of the transition? For, as admitted earlier, there is no doubt that a far-reaching transformation took place, and that linguistic science set the paradigm. If we stick to the *Paspasahnika*, key analytic features rapidly come into view. With the overall problem posed above firmly in mind, I offer

[7] *padani*: RV 1.164.5; *padaniya* in *Brhadaranyaka Upanisad* 1.4.7 etc.
[8] Heesterman (1993) and (1964).

a short synopsis of the middle section of Patanjali's argument for studying grammar. Only those empirical elements germane to our discussion are highlighted here.

Patanjali, rather like today's surviving classicists, feels he is struggling against a declining system of education. In the old days (*purakalpe*) Brahmin students would begin grammatical studies immediately after their initiation (*samskarottara-kalam*). Only after internalizing a detailed, analytical knowledge of phonology did they proceed to learn Vedic words and texts. These days, however, students simply start off with the Veda and all too rapidly graduate as reciters or teachers (*vaktarah*). Convinced that they know all the Vedic lexicon simply by reciting the Veda and all everyday words simply from everyday speech (*lokat*), they have declared grammar to be superfluous. Panini, out of friendly concern (*suhrd bhutva*) for such misguided Brahmin ignoramuses, has set out the grammar.[9] The need to safeguard the precise transmission of the Vedic text is taken for granted in this passage (earlier in the *Paspasahnika* it is explicitly formulated), but the rationale for grammatical studies is by no means limited to that goal. One canon—the Veda—already exists, and another, that of Panini, the foundational teacher (*acarya*) of grammar, is coming into being. This latter process deserves to be more fully described. In both cases, there is a danger of something being lost, hence a culturally useful anxiety.

In other words, discontinuity is by no means limited to cosmology or metaphysics. The system of learning—and, as the Vedic verse cited earlier already suggests, language itself—share this very problem. There are gaps that only grammar can bridge, but it is getting harder to find students for this daunting subject. The rewards, however, are definitely commensurate with the effort. In overall terms, Patanjali thinks grammar is conducive to well-being (*abhyudaya*).[10] Correct speech leads to merit (*dharma*), hence to whatever the gods' wishing-cow can offer.[11] Somewhat surprisingly, this is not a normative or prescriptive approach to speech,[12] for Patanjali recogniz-

[9] *Mahabhasya* 1.1, p. 38. Bhandarkar argued that the friendly teacher, here as elsewhere in *Mahabhasya*, is Katyayana: see discussion by Joshi (1980), 39.

[10] *Mahabhasya*, loc. cit., following Katyayana's *varttika*: *sastra-purvake prayoge 'bhyudayas tat tulyam veda-sabdena*. See discussion by Cardona (1988), 635.

[11] Ibid.

[12] This is also Cardona's conclusion: ibid., 644.

es that intelligibility does not depend on grammatical correctness, and dialectical as well as clearly non-Paninian forms have their own natural place in the world. The early Sanskrit grammarians are remarkably empiricist and pragmatic. The point is that pragmatic goals, as defined in terms internal to this system, make Panini's restrictive viewpoint (*niyama*) attractive. But what, on closer inspection, are those goals?

Some are neatly stated in a list of thirteen uses (*prayojanani*) of grammar. We need not look closely at each of them, but a few examples can be cited. There is, to begin with, the negative one of the demons (*asura*) who were defeated by the gods because the former mispronounced a certain phrase (*helayo helaya iti*). A good Brahmin should avoid such obviously dangerous, even potentially lethal barbarisms (*na mlecchitavai*). Even a misplaced tonal accent can kill the Vedic sacrificer, as in the well-known case of the demon Tvastr, who shifted the accent on the compound word *indra-satru*, thereby making Indra his deadly enemy.[13] Notice that we are in the domain of the sacrificial ritual, where linguistic usage is particularly charged.[14] But even outside the ritual there is reason to take care with language. If one wants to maximize the advantageous fruits of study, then grammar is absolutely necessary; understanding, which depends upon grammatical analysis, is what makes meaning spring to life, like fire latent within wood.[15] Those who study Veda without penetrating its meaning are like a pillar that can bear a heavy weight; but those who do internalize the meaning go beyond this in-between existence and reach heaven.[16] What is at stake, in short, is unlimited victory or success (*yas tu prayunkte kusalo visese....so 'nalpam apnoti jayam paratra*). I will return to this theme of infinity in relation to grammar.

A fascinating skeptical note creeps in here. What, Patanjali's imagined partner in debate asks, is Patanjali's authority for such statements? One possibility is the body of remembered verses (*sloka*) that have come down from the past. But the verse that springs to mind, ascribed to Bhraja,[17] wonders why the small quantity of wine

[13] See *Taittiriya Samhita* 2.5.2.1.

[14] Patanjali cites the contrasting case of the *yarvanastarvana* sages, whose peculiar (regional-dialectical) pronunciation entailed no devastating consequences since they were outside the ritual context.

[15] This is stated negatively, as in *Nirukta* 1.18.

[16] Thus *Nirukta* 1.6.2, often cited by pandits n this connection.

[17] According to the tradition, Bhraja = Katyayana/Vararuci, though Nagesa

consumed within the sacrificial ritual (the Sautramani) should help anyone achieve the goal of reaching heaven, when vast quantities of wine consumed in "normal" circumstances fail to work in this direction. Who could deny the eminently rational precision of this formulation?[18] We are in the midst of a discussion about the uses of grammar, but suddenly the entire world of Vedic sacrifice is put into question; the fearlessness of the grammarian is to be admired. Clearly, we are in some kind of "axial" discourse, which has expanded to include its own antithesis. Of course, the author has an answer to his own question: Bhraja (whoever he was) uttered this verse when he was distracted and not paying attention (*pramatta-gita esa tatra-bhavatah*).

There are further pragmatically defined contexts in which knowledge of grammar counts. For example, an informed Brahmin prolongs the name of his interlocutor in greeting. An ignoramus does not merit such address and instead is greeted casually, like a woman. In order to avoid such ignominy, it is best to study grammar. But from this domestic setting we are suddenly elevated to the ancient Vedic vision of language: it is at this point that Patanjali quotes the verse about language being hidden. Perhaps, indeed, one level is no more practical, and no less imbued with existential energies, than the other. In a sense, this is the point. One can even explicate the four quarters of speech—nouns, verbs, prefixes, and particles, according to Patanjali—but this enumeration is brought into line with a more complex set of 4 (horns), 3 (feet), 2 (heads), 7 (hands), and 3 points of binding, all belonging to the "roaring bull" that is the Great God (*maho devah*) who is also Speech and who, as such, has entered into mortals (*martyan*). This is RgVeda 4.58.3, elaborately reconceived by the grammarian to include the parts of speech, three temporal modes, the eternal and empirical faces of language (note this division), the seven cases, and the three corporeal loci of sonar production (chest, throat, head). Patanjali has, needless to say, radically reconceived the Vedic verse, here recycled to a new purpose within an intellectual universe quite remote from that of the poet who composed it. Nonetheless, the grammarian's purpose includes

(*Laghu-siddhanta-manjusa)* thinks Bhraja was the arch-skeptic, the Buddha. See below.

[18] Bhartrhari (*Mahabhasya-tika*, p. 15) spells out one possible conclusion: One should forget the Sautramani and drink happily in the pub (*panagara-sala*).

the following formulation: "We should study grammar so that we ourselves may become like (equal to) the Great God."

This is the conclusion to Patanjali's brief discussion of RV 4.58.3. But by now we are in the heart of a linguistic metaphysics that continues to insist on the kind of transformation just mentioned. Grammar is meant to turn the grammatically informed speaker into God. There is nothing metaphorical about such a statement. On the contrary, nothing could be more pragmatic. Moreover, it is self-consciously continuous with other Vedic statements about language and sustained by further Vedic quotations, including one from the most far-reaching of all Vedic attempts to characterize this mysterious domain, RV 10.71.

> You look, but you may not see the word.
> You listen, but you may not hear it.
> It shows itself,
> full of desire, fully dressed,
> like a woman to her lover.[19]

Patanjali fully accepts the notion that speaking or listening to language is, in itself, no indication of a deep connection to this mysterious and compelling being—actually a goddess—who, when activated by desire from within her own autonomous, volitional self, is capable of revealing this self to the person capable of opening to such a vision. And who is this person? The grammarian, of course. The whole course of study could be said to be predicated on this potentiality—a process meant to prepare the grammatically informed speaker and listener for the unpredictable moment when revelation may strike. "Grammar should be studied," concludes Patanjali, "so that [the goddess] Speech may uncover herself to us" (*van no vivrnuyad atmanam ity adhyeyam vyakaranam*).

See how far we are from an image of simple "scientific" mastery. Naturally, the grammarian is meant to master his material, and in a highly disciplined, logical, empirical, indeed scientific manner at that. No concessions are given to the lazy or the ignorant. Nonetheless, what is at stake is nothing less than a revelation from a godly source or domain. One cannot even be sure, despite the matter-of-fact tone of this section, that Speech will reveal herself in anything

[19] RV 10.71.4. The translation is taken from Narayana Rao and Shulman (2002), 192, where we discuss its implications at some length.

close to a referential mode. Truth may well be resistant to semanticity per se. The Vedic verse itself implies something like this with its image of the desire-driven but still fully dressed Vac, the goddess of speech. The word, eager to reveal itself, is never openly naked. For those who cannot hear it, the surface becomes no more than superficial static—a kind of noise. Perhaps the problem lies with habituation, for the next verse in the hymn speaks poignantly of the person who is *sthira-pita*, someone who repeats a conventional meaning already known.[20]

In any case, the true function of grammar seems to have expanded considerably. Grammar is what prepares the ground for transformative experience.[21] In a way, it is a kind of conjuring, as Patanjali suggests by his next quotation—of the second verse in this same RgVedic hymn, 10.71. The wise speak as if sifting grain through a sieve (*titaü*); this is how they recognize "friendship" (*sakhyani*); a blessed mark or sign (*bhadaisam laksmih*) is placed upon their speech. Why the sieve? Patanjali discusses the unusual word and speculates: the sieve is spread wide, it is pierced with holes; it purifies language or makes it luminous. The image is one of stretching, unfolding, opening space, and cleansing.[22] It is striking that luminosity is here a matter of marking: *laksmi*, says Patanjali, comes from that marking that is radiance (*laksmir laksanad bhasanat parivrdha bhavati*). This, it seems, is what intensifies the revelatory presence of Speech. Such is also the meaning of the "friendship" the verse mentions, an experience that is possible only in the domain of language (*vag-visaya*) that is almost beyond traversing (*ya esa durgo margah*), and that, paradoxically—since we are speaking of friendship— can only be known by the single, lone individual (*eka-gamya*). Apparently, to come close to language in its divine, largely hidden aspect, through the strangely opaque window opened up by marking the linguistic surface, is a lonely business.[23]

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[20] Following Sayana, who glosses the phrase *jnatartham*. See also Staal (1977). Staal translates the same phrase, "[Many, they say, have grown] rigid in this friendship."

[21] I thus must differ strongly from Bimal Krishna Matilal's discussion of Patanjali's rationale for grammatical studies: "Patanjali mentions other [impractical?] reasons, but all of them seem to be fanciful from our point of view." Matilal (1992), 11.

[22] Bhartrhari in his *Mahabhasya-tika* says that corrupt words are purified through grammar (1, p. 17).

[23] On marking, see Shulman (2000), 198-206.

Let me restate the matter rather starkly. We begin with empirical observation of linguistic facts but very rapidly find ourselves in the fiercely heightened world of sacrificial ritual, where a single syllable, if mispronounced, can kill, and where failure to understand kills the connection. But even outside this severely bounded realm, language offers access to divinity; in fact, once activated by the grammarian, it divinizes or re-divinizes the speaker/listener. Grammar reveals the hiddenness of god and also cracks open a small slot of potential access to this luminous and desirous presence. Or we could say that grammar offers a syntax regulating reconnection within which, however, the original gap in being continuously re-erupts, as will become clear in discussion below. Such a syntax encloses the still hidden—if you like, "transcendent"—parts of deity within itself, thereby governing the elusive transitions to and from these parts in systemic ways without, however, ever fully domesticating the recalcitrant and dynamic goddess that is speech. In such a system, no external vantage point can be discerned. In such a system, grammar is remarkably close to sorcery or divination.

Two last examples drive home this point. Ritualists say that a son should be named on the tenth (more precisely, after the tenth) day after birth. But a name, as we have seen, is no simple matter. It should have either two or four syllables (we are speaking of male names)[24] and should begin with a voiced sound; there should be a semi-vowel in the middle; the diphthongs *ai* and *au* should be avoided initially, and the secondary nominal derivatives (*taddhita*) are unacceptable. None of this is possible without detailed phonological and grammatical knowledge. So if you want your son to thrive, you had better study grammar.[25] Then, in a variation on the earlier statement about becoming the Great God, *RgVeda* 8.61.12 is cited: we should study grammar in order to become true gods (*satya-devah*) like Varuna, whose mouth takes in the seven streams that are, says Patanjali, the seven Sanskrit cases (flowing into the palate, *kakuda*).

The grammarian is on his way to becoming a god. A wise father puts grammar to practical use in safeguarding his son's life. Only a skilled grammarian will see and hear the divinity at the moment of

[24] Female names should have an odd number of syllables: see Subrahmanya Sastri (1960), 1:35.

[25] Bhartrhari, loc. cit., comments that grammar is to be put to use from the moment of giving the male child his name.

his or her self-disclosure. Perhaps only a grammarian can help to bring about this disclosure. Once again, these are eminently practical matters. Later voices, notably Bhartrhari, bring in the language of healing: grammar heals the impurities of speech the way Ayurvedic medicine heals the body.[26] Or this may be a matter of Yoga, enabling the integrating and healing insight (*pratibha*) that reassembles the scattered and unfolded bits of sequential speech and thus reconstitutes the pre-existing and underlying wholeness.[27] This Bhartrharian conception of re-unification by swallowing up linear sequence has its own logic and telos; but Patanjali, too, we should recall, makes an interesting distinction between the eternal (*nitya*) and the empirically evident or effectual (*karya*) faces or heads of language in the context of turning the learned grammarian into the Great God. Both faces are subsumed within the domain of grammaticality. For this very reason, the therapeutic idiom makes good sense. Indeed, the two faces may well embody a single, sometimes hidden, sometimes partly visible or audible reality.

Infinity and Grammaticality

We cannot pursue here the further reaches of Patanjali's argument in the *Paspasahnika*. Let me just mention that the question of the eternal (*nitya*) aspect of speech is powerfully developed in the direction of a debate about "form," which is also genus (*akrti*), in relation to the underlying, indestructible substance, *dravya*. If you make pots out of clay, you can subsequently break the pots and re-use the clay to make other objects; the form changes, but the clay remains clay. Similarly, language evolves or devolves into reference (Patanjali gives the first strong hint of this classical theme). We know there is something eternal about language—specifically, about meaning in relation to phonetic form—because, while you can ask a potter to make you a pot, no one ever asks a grammarian to make some new word. Perhaps even more striking is the discussion about the inexhaust-

[26] *Vakyapadiya* 1.14 with *vrtti*; cf. Cardona (1988), 637. The healing capacity of grammatically informed knowledge is a topos in the later literature: the wise know not to recite the Veda into the wind, for fear of injuring God (*MBh* 12.309-20). A good reader extracts thorns from the text he reads, thereby healing it: Muddupalani, *Radhika-santvanamu*, *avatarika* 6.

[27] Bhartrhari, op. cit.

ibility of language. There is no end to words. Also, learning words as a series or continuous list is highly ineffectual: the king of the gods, Indra himself, studied with the great teacher Brhaspati in this manner, and after a thousand years of study they had still not approached the end of the list. These days a human being might, if lucky, live to be a hundred, so Indra's failure speaks to the impossibility of exhausting verbal knowledge by going word by word. Once again, grammar, by its synthesizing and paradigmatic methods, offers a potential short-cut.

This last idea suggests a pattern of wider implication. A somewhat more abstract summary of the themes we have examined might focus on three closely related notions, which together comprise the core of this "axial" cognitive field. Each of the three is highly culture- and context-specific. A complex statement on the usefulness of grammar, replete with proof-texts taken from the recognized canon, repeatedly generates expressions of inexhaustibility (or infinity), systematicity, and reflexivity. Language is infinite, *ananta*, in the very specific sense of resisting linear definition or exhaustive enumeration. In fact, there is no question of an even series regularly progressing forward (if anything, language, especially referential language, tends, in the view of the later tradition, to unfold backward over retrospective and recursive loops within time; it merely creates an illusion of forward movement).[28] Infinity, a cultural construct like any other, is here probably not a progression at all but rather, like the Indian notion of zero,[29] a generative and restless, unevenly flowing force. The unevenness is what underlies Patanjali's recommendation to use *samskrta*, grammatically perfected, speech: language, when heightened in this mode, as in the Vedic mantras, is ontologically intensified and energized; hence the *niyama* or useful "restriction" in an otherwise quite limitless domain of possible speech forms. The infinite linguistic energy, by nature given to differential intensities, has features of self-limitation (sequence, fixed form) and self-revelation that offer scope to the grammarian's praxis.

Such praxis depends on a strong notion of system. For regular transitions to take place among domains—that is, for the divinatory and mantic potential of language to become usable— systemic

[28] See discussion in Narayana Rao and Shulman, op. cit.
[29] See Ruegg (1971), 1-71 (esp. p.40 and sources cited there).

organization is needed. Here the basic logic seems to be one of continuous emergence (of sound and meaning) as perceptible surface—a surface fashioned in the shape of the mark that triggers the emergence, though each such moment of assuming form takes apart an earlier frame. Moreover, there is something self-subversive about such a system, for its very dynamism reflects the explicit sense of a still hidden and deeper (infinite) reality that is in no way external to the whole. This same standpoint informs the kind of reflexivity that comes into play in such a system. Highly analytical and meticulously empirical as the Paninian method is, in Patanjali (and even more strongly in Bhartrhari) it seems to reject the very possibility of any external, Archimedian place of reference. To use an image popular in much later, South Indian contexts, the "eye that sees itself seeing" is not external to the perception. What it sees—as an intensification of the normal processes of which it is itself a part—is the perceptual frame dissolving into its supposed contents, like the clay pots that are merging back into the residual "fact" of clay. This movement recognizes, *from within*, the act of framing in what could be called a mythic mode, in which the framed contents or objects of perception are woven indistinguishably into the frame.[30] We have here a highly sophisticated cognitive stance—thought folding back upon itself[31]—that depends upon the notion of infinity just articulated and its systemic internalization within the analyst-observer. Grammar is one, highly privileged arena for such observation and reflection. It would seem that in India, at any rate, we might seek the axial moment of insight just here, in the radical negation of any external frame and the restoration of a powerful, though continuously self-transforming, continuity in cosmic domains. The other, divine world, which looks and feels as if it were strongly cut off from ours, has now become internal to ours. This is a cosmos in which the metaphysical infinite or generative whole is not merely continuous with its partial ("mundane") embodiments but actually identical with them—assuming, of course, the reflexive vision that, in seeing itself seeing, in fact recreates this continuity by dissolving the normally non-transparent frame.

[30] See Handelman (in press).

[31] See Grinshpon (2001), 11: "The light of consciousness turns upon itself, becoming dark, as it were."

Another, less abstract way of saying this is to highlight again the paradigmatic understanding of language as combining, in a way very different from, let us say, Plato's competing theories in the *Cratylus*, mantic, pragmatic, empiricist, and analytical aspects and aims. Or we could say that grammar serves both an autonomous and self-contained analytical-intellectual purpose and a divinatory and ritual goal, which comes through clearly in the rationale Patanjali offers for the entire enterprise; in this context, the reflection inherent in grammatical study is also a kind of far-reaching re-mythologization, hardly a proto-Entzauberung.[32] At the same time, there is room within the field of linguistics for skepticism and, as we shall see, for profound conflict and contestation, in part structured around this same rationale. In any case, what emerges as a diagnostic feature of the axial transformation in first-millennium BCE. India is something like a notion of grammaticality per se—in the metaphysical sense I have tried to define, including those parts of language or reality that necessarily, on principle, elude or undermine any formal syntax but that still impart to grammar its pragmatic and dynamic foundations.

Grammars Given, Learned, and Destroyed

Perhaps such grammars are what we need to compare when we move from India to Greece or Israel or China. Clearly, in the Indian case, there is a pronounced movement toward intensifying internal debate around linguistic themes and, with this enhanced contestation, toward intensified conflict of a social and institutional character, as axial theory would lead us to expect. Linguistics, that is, in the form of rival, mutually exclusive linguistic theories, assumes the role of touchstone and loadstone, legitimating and rationalizing struggles among competing communities (Buddhists in relation to non-Buddhists, for example). The kind of passionate, often fatal engagement that, in other civilizations, tends to base itself on theological or philosophical premises begins, in India, with arguments over rival grammars. I want to offer a brief look at the way such conflict was

[32] I refer to Benjamin's uncannily similar view of "die Magie der Sprache" and, above all, the always individualized and specific "Unendlichkeit" of any given language; see the essay excerpted at the opening of this article.

codified and refracted in the master-narrative that the Sanskrit tradition produced about the history of grammatical studies. The mere existence of such a story is itself an indication of the transformation going back to the "axial" stage when this particular, paradigmatic discipline crystallized—also a restatement of its latent tensions. Thus certain themes already noted are resumed, with an occasional twist, in the master-narrative, which we find in Kashmiri texts of the *katha* genre from the eleventh to twelfth centuries CE. I offer a synoptic summary, followed by a few comments.

This is the story of how Panini's grammar achieved authority and preeminence—in effect, how it destroyed its rivals. It has three main protagonists: Panini himself and two other teachers, Vararuci and Gunadhya. Somewhat surprisingly, two of the three, including Panini, are supposed to have been idiots. Nothing else, it seems, can explain how this godly grammar came into the human sphere.

It is also the story of multiple and mutually reinforcing curses. Once the god Siva—the ultimate grammarian—was telling his wife Parvati a story that was supposed to be unique, unknown to anyone else. One of Siva's attendants, called Puspadanta, managed to eavesdrop on the narration; he then told his wife, who repeated the story to Parvati, who, incensed at the act of interloping, cursed Puspadanta to become that most sorry of creatures, a human being. Puspadanta had a friend who tried to intercede on his behalf and was also cursed to suffer the same fate. But all curses have an end, and in this case the key to release was set down by Parvati as follows: when the humanized Puspadanta, now known as Vararuci,[33] would tell the story he had heard to a certain ogre in the wilderness, Puspadanta would revert to his divine state; and when that same ogre would repeat the story to Puspadanta's friend, the latter would also be freed of his humanity. Naturally, it is only in telling or retelling the story—in effect, always a permutation of his own life history, that he has forgotten—that the story-teller recovers an awareness of his original (divine) identity. Take this as hermeneutic rule number one.

So Puspadanta, now Vararuci, was born on earth in the north

[33] Identified by the grammatical tradition with Katyayana, the *varttika-kara*, whose statements provide Patanjali with the structural skeleton of his commentary. Cf. Joshi (1980), 35-41. Recall that Vararuci-Katyayana is also supposedly the skeptic Bhraja, mentioned above. Vararuci exemplifies in a unique manner the ambivalence built into the self-image of the Sanskrit grammarians.

Indian city of Kausambi. His father died when he was young, and his mother brought up the boy. One day two Brahmins—Vyadi and Indradatta—turned up and discovered, to their delight, that the young boy Vararuci was a *sakrd-grahi* (also *sruta-dhara*), that is, capable of retaining in his memory any text or utterance that he heard, *precisely as heard*, after a single hearing. The two Brahmins had been looking for just such a person, because only in his presence would a certain learned teacher, Varsa of Pataliputra, teach what he knew—above all, grammar, the key to all erudition. Varsa, incidentally, had also started out as an idiot; he had learned grammar mostly out of shame from the mouth of the god Karttikeya. Taking the young Vararuci with them, the two Brahmins returned to Varsa, who commenced their education. Vararuci immediately, at first hearing, memorized whatever the teacher taught; Vyadi still had to hear everything twice; Indradatta, rather disgracefully, required a third recitation. Notice that no one has any use, in this process, for the cumbersome and inaccurate business of writing things down.

So far so good. Enter Panini, one of many new pupils who were, at this point, attracted to the great master Varsa, who had opened his doors ever since meeting the retentive Vararuci. No one knows why Panini wanted to study, but one thing is certain: he had a very dull mind (*jada-buddhi*). Some say he was mocked by his fellow students, others that he disliked the life of serving a teacher; in any case, he left Varsa and went off to the Himalayas to worship Siva, who, great grammarian that he is, gave him knowledge of what is called a "new grammar, the foremost of the sciences" (*sarva-vidya-mukham... vyakaranam navam*). (Perhaps such short-cuts are, indeed, the best way to master Sanskrit, as I sometimes tell my students.) With this god-derived erudition, Panini returned to Pataliputra and challenged Vararuci and the others to a grammar-contest. The debates went on for seven full days; on the eighth day, Vararuci was clearly on the point of winning, when Siva interfered with a ferocious roar (*hunkara*) from the skies. The result was the total destruction and loss of the earlier grammatical system known as Aindra, which Vararuci had learned.[34] Panini's system carried the day; Vararuci and his companions were reduced to the status of fools.

We might pause for a moment to consider the plethora of half-

[34] See Burnell (1976).

wits who people this story about the Queen of Sciences in India, the paradigm for all other forms of knowledge, i.e., grammar. Notice, also, how labyrinthine is the process of transmitting learning, and how precarious: only the perfect student, with rapid and precise retention, can induce the omniscient (previously idiotic) teacher to part with what he knows. But even this is far from sufficient, since "new" and, we may assume, "real" or "correct" knowledge can only be obtained from the god, and not by studying, at that. Moreover, this true knowledge triumphs not by the wits of its master but by a rather desperate act on the part of that same god, who cannot tolerate seeing his grammatical system defeated in debate. Finally, Panini's triumph—which actually wipes out the earlier, rival system—is apparently the victory of a single truth, a kind of fanatical grammatical monotheism. We see again that in India not theology but linguistics inspires these familiar emotions.

But there is more. Vararuci, shamed and humiliated, imitated his tormentor. He, too, went to the mountains and asked Siva to give him solid knowledge of grammar; and Siva revealed to Vararuci, too, this same Paninian science in its entirety (*sastram prakasayam asa paniniyam asesatah*). The comprehensive and systemic aspects of Paninian grammar, with its self-reinforcing feedback loops, are clearly present in the storyteller's mind. Vararuci returned home, by now a master of Panini's *sutras*; his own former teacher, Varsa, was eager to learn the new science and eventually managed to do so, though not from Vararuci but, once again, from the lips of a god, Karttikeya (*his* first teacher). Maybe there is no other way. In any case, Panini's system, which is really Siva's system, henceforth reigned supreme.

A political episode of some importance ensues. Varsa, we should recall, had begun to teach grammar and other lore at the instigation of the two Brahmins, Vyadi and Indradatta. (The former, Vyadi, is identified by the tradition as the author of a lost work on linguistics, the *Sangraha*.)[35] Since both of them, along with the now fully competent Vararuci, had at last completed their course of study, it was time for them to pay Varsa his teacher's fee, which Varsa pitched at a cool 10 million gold coins. Only a generous king such as the famous Nanda in Ayodhya might be able to come up with the solution to this problem. But as the three Brahmin graduates arrived

[35] *Vakya-padiya* of Bhartrhari 2.476 See below.

in Ayodhya with the thought of seeking the king's help, lamentations broke out all over the city; Nanda was dead. Yet not for nothing had Indradatta acquired an education. Using Yogic magic, apparently one of the skills he had developed as a student, he entered into the body of the dead Nanda and revived it, meanwhile leaving his own temporarily lifeless body in a temple in the safekeeping of Vyadi. Vararuci—still obviously the outstanding intellect among the three ex-students of Varsa—then presented himself to the king, Pseudo-Nanda/Indradatta (or Yoga-Nanda, as the tradition knows him, because of his Yogic powers) and asked for and at once received the ten million pieces of gold. The only remaining problem was that the real Nanda had had a minister named Sakatala, who, realizing what had happened and eager to maintain, for the sake of stability, at least the illusion that the king was alive, sent out his servants to burn any dead bodies lying about in the kingdom, including, alas, that of Indradatta. Not even Vyadi's constant vigilance could prevent this coup. As a result, the erstwhile Indradatta was now trapped inside the body of the erstwhile Nanda. Vararuci, in circumstances too complicated to summarize here, became the minister and adviser to the pseudo-king.

We will leave him there, still living out the effects of his curse. But I cannot resist pointing out that in the Magadha state, which serves in the *katha* literature as the prototype for classical polity, power comes to be vested in a king who is actually a Brahmin grammarian in disguise. Not only has the discipline of grammar expanded to include, at its very heart, the ultimate goals of Vedic sacrificial ritual; linguistic erudition has also effectively appropriated or subsumed the political sphere, thereby asserting a higher authority than a mere king possesses on his own. Yoga-Nanda will eventually make way for Candragupta Maurya and, perhaps more to the point, for the famous Brahmin minister Canakya-Kautalya, supposed author of the foundational text of political science, the *Artha-sastra.* Politics, like linguistics, like Vedic ritual, like law, has its own autonomy (and primary text) in the eyes of the retrospective story-tradition, as it does in the "post-axial" reality of the fourth-century BCE. It is the genealogy of this autonomy, and the relations between the partially conflated domains, that are of interest to us here. The discovery of grammar, in short, entails consequences for kingship and state.

For Vararuci to be released, he had to tell the story he overheard from Siva to the ogre who would, in turn, pass this tale on to an-

other cursed divinity, known on earth as Gunadhya. The story of Gunadhya nicely recapitulates what we have seen in the case of Vararuci. Once again, this is a tale of rivalry between grammarians. The scene has now shifted to southern India and the kingdom of the Satavahanas. Another kingdom, another ignoramus: this time it is the king himself who makes an embarrassing mistake in Sanskrit while playing with his wives in the palace pool. The poor monarch did not know the rules of word-combination, and his queen mocked him. Such humiliation induced depression: the king, like any sane person, wanted only one thing—to know Sanskrit thoroughly. Unfortunately, this is a process that requires some twelve years, at least. The great Gunadhya, however, as court pandit, offered a special discount to the languishing ruler; he would teach him Sanskrit grammar, to perfection, in a mere six years of daily study. But Gunadhya had a rival, one Sarvavarman, who, as it happens, had learned grammar from the god Karttikeya—the preferred method of instruction, as we can see from these repeated examples. Once again, however, as with Panini and Vararuci, there is a technical hitch that changes the course of Indian linguistics. When the god Karttikeya was teaching Sarvavarman, he, the god, like any teacher, recited the first *sutra* of the grammar. But Sarvavarman, precocious pupil that he was, immediately guessed what the next *sutra* would be and, unable to contain his impatience, uttered it himself. This rash or impudent arrogation of intellectual power angered the god, who at once announced to Sarvavarman that if he had only restrained himself, the particular grammar he was studying would have replaced that of Panini (*abhavisyad idam sastram paniniyopamardakam*). As it is, given the pupil's breach of etiquette, this grammar would survive in peripheral fashion under the name *Katantra* or *Kalapaka*.[36] Notice that the underlying premise is, again, the firm belief that only one grammar can be dominant, authoritative, "true."

Still, Sarvavarman was clearly a highly accomplished grammarian and teacher, for he managed—albeit with the help of Karttikeya, his own divine teacher—to impart complete knowledge of Sanskrit to the ignorant Satavahana king within a mere six months. (This feat

[36] On *Katantra-vyakarana*, which seems "to have come out of a felt desire for a more popular and easier grammar than Panini's formidable system provides," see Coward and Kunjunni Raja (1990), 17; also Chatterjee (1964), 52-3. Medieval commentators occasionally cite *Katantra* to explain unconventional usages.

was possible only because the king had been a wise sage in his former life and thus only needed to be reminded of what he had forgotten; so here, too, the king is a pandit in exile or disguise.) But Sarvavarman's success was intolerable in the eyes of the learned Gunadhya, his rival at court, who therefore took a vow never to speak again in Sanskrit, Prakrit, or the local language (*desa-bhasa*—this being Telangana, perhaps a proto-Telugu?). Committed to silence, Gunadhya left the kingdom and wandered into the forest. But being an accomplished linguist, he soon acquired the language of the demons who inhabit these wilderness spaces (Paisaci); and there he met that same ogre who had heard the original story, as told by Siva to Parvati, from the lips of Puspadanta/Vararuci (at length released from service at the court of Yoga-Nanda). The ogre, a fluent native speaker of Paisaci, of course, retold the story in that language to Gunadhya—we are back to hermeneutic rule number one—and the latter wrote it down, in Paisaci, in 700,000 verses, using his blood for ink (the latter was in short supply in the forest). Now both the ogre and Gunadhya could be released from their respective curses, but not before a final, heart-wrenching twist to this convoluted tale. Gunadhya, like any hopeful author, sent his Paisaci manuscript off for publication—not by chance, to the same Satavahana court he had left in shame and despair. Narcissistic wounds don't heal; perhaps he could still recoup the loss of his pandit's pride. But the king rejected out of hand the manuscript, inscribed in blood and reeking of demonic presence. So Gunadhya made a fire in the forest and stood before it, casting leaf after leaf of his work, the so-called *Brhatkatha* or "Great Story," into the flames, while the animals and birds gathered around, weeping at the loss. It is an image too tragic to be contained—one thinks of Bakhtin in Moscow of 1942, literally smoking into oblivion the pages of his magnum opus—and it was even too much for the Satavahana king, who finally rushed to the spot and managed to salvage the final 100,000 verses of the *Brhatkatha*. We have them today, not in Paisaci, but in various Sanskrit, Tamil, and other regional-language adaptations.[37]

Books that matter nearly always have this fate. What is left is a fragment of the whole. The primordial fracture in the cosmos is re-

[37] Summarized from *Katha-sarit-sagara* of Somadeva, 1.1-8 and *Hara-carita-cintamani* of Jayaratha, 27.

plicated in the worlds of knowledge. Bhartrhari tells us that this is what happened to the ancient *Sangraha* grammar (traditionally linked to Vyadi of our story, who could remember what he was taught after a second hearing) as well as to Patanjali's *Mahabhasya*, which miraculously survived only in that remote and perhaps barbarous place, South India.[38] The corollary to this proposition about fragmentation and forgetting is the theme of suppressing, eradicating, or marginalizing the rival grammars (of Vararuci and Sarvavarman). To the extent that linguistic science survives intact, as a comprehensive system, it does so only through such radical acts of opposition.

We have come some way from the rather more open-ended and empiricist tones of Patanjali's *Paspasahnika*. The image of grammatical authority that the medieval tradition perpetuates is one of striking exclusivity—this in a culture that is usually regarded as fundamentally tolerant and inclusivist. The exclusive authority of the Paninian system is now felt to be a matter of truth versus falsehood, although truth of this intensity apparently goes hand in hand with the no less powerful sense that something critical has been lost or destroyed. Moreover, authority is here derived not from sheer intellectual preeminence, judged on its own terms, but from the grammatically informed deity who reveals the secret of the system only to devoted idiots, and who later intervenes, rather brutally, to ensure the triumph of this somewhat dubious vessel of learning. In other words, an unsettling doubt is built into the skeleton of the discipline along with the strong assertion of its uniquely divine origins. In medieval times, this doubt sometimes translates into overt hostility to Panini and, in particular, to his bizarre meta-language, intelligible only to cognoscenti.[39] At the same time, the mantic or magical properties of grammar, including the use of Panini's *sutras* for purposes of exorcism and divination, are conspicuous in the oral stories that reflect upon the powers of language, poetry, and poetics.[40]

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[38] *Vakya-padiya* 2.476-82. These verses are sometimes understood to refer as well to an ancient grammar by the demon Ravana that was stolen from the Trikuta Mountain. Compare the South Indian materials on the origin of grammar discussed in my paper: Shulman (2001).

[39] Thus *Visva-gunadarsa-campu* of Venkatadhvarin, 1075-77, including the verse cited at the start of this essay.

[40] E.g. *Bhoja-prabandha* 307, where Kalidasa plays with the *sutras* in order to banish a highly educated *raksasa* demon from a home.

Here the continuity with the *Paspasahnika*, as analyzed above, is particularly trenchant.

In short, grammar—or, more precisely, the notion of a grammaticalized cosmos—has become the central arbiter of the mature cultural system. As such, it both absolutizes its truth claims and incorporates skeptical voices, as we see from the narrative of conflict and repeated near-misses. But grammar is also, for classical India, the idiom used for fixing boundaries and determining identities. As such, it acquires the exclusivity and acrimony that elsewhere attach to these primary issues. Possibly in no other major civilization is grammar raised to such a height and pitch, not in merely intellectual terms but, more to the point, as the bearer of socially contested cultural and metaphysical themes. To some extent, at least, this role must reflect the peculiar magical potency of grammar as the medium of reconnection among fragmented domains, a direct consequence of the fracture in reality that predates and conditions the crisis of the mid-first millenium BCE. Part and parcel of this magic is the specific form of reflection that I have tried to outline, and that tends deliberately to undermine the assumed existence of an external observer. The grammarian, like all the rest of us, swims or drowns in an all-enveloping flood of words and sounds, the same flood that he uses to articulate his analytic conclusions. He has no other medium or tool.

Looking back over the intricate and ramified story as a whole, we might extrapolate several major epistemic themes: Complete knowledge is possible but normally emerges through indirection. Complete foolishness may be a necessary precondition. A good memory is, however, a helpful trigger, though it may not suffice. Something more, perhaps a little more creative or inventive, seems critical: witness Vararuci's ultimate failure and, by contrast, Gunadhya's poetic feat. Still, too much independence in this domain is dangerous, as Sarvavarman's experience can attest. The god does not like to be preempted when he is teaching grammar. Nor does he like to see his preferred system defeated in debate. God is the grammarian par excellence, and learning begins—and perhaps ends—with grammar. Even kingship is subordinated to the pandit's power, with its Yogic or mantic component. On one level, grammar is the study of precisely these useful elements, which presuppose a near-total absence of accident within language. Homophony, for example, is

meaningful and consequential, never a matter of chance.[41] Still, there is an unfinished or incomplete aspect to normative grammatical knowledge; counter-systems survive, with difficulty, on its periphery; doubt lingers; the grammarian's great texts are seen as fragments of lost, much larger works. Language itself may have something of this open-endedness: a great linguist may renounce Sanskrit and any other known language (in favor of silence) only to be drawn magnetically into the world of some other, perhaps demonic tongue. Once inside, the dynamic of self-fracturing wholeness will repeat itself. The original gap in being continuously re-erupts.

Were there space, we could see how a classical South Indian linguistic metaphysics actually incorporates and uses this notion of grammar's self-limitation, it's tendency to thrust the grammarian beyond his given set of rules and categories. As with the *Paspasahnika*, ultimacy or infinity is not exterior to the system but is, in effect, internalized and recycled by it; and mechanisms are invented to allow for the always unsettling consequences of such a move. Moreover, the "magical" properties of sounds and words are taken even further: grammar becomes sorcery, perhaps before all else. These matters cannot be investigated here.

Conclusion

Instead, I venture a condensed restatement of my argument in the light of comparative concerns. The starting point is the centrality of grammar, as our texts explicitly insist. We see this mostly clearly in the severe truth-claims made for Panini's text. The grammarians themselves naturally claim that grammar is *pradhana*, the main discipline, also the door to the world of the gods—a close ally, in short, of Vedic ritual. Like the latter, grammar provides a medium of reconnection, a strong assertion of ontic continuity among radically disparate fields. The "axial" colouring of grammatical studies lies partially in just this assertion, which I have also called a remythologizing. The grammarian, who deals in infinity, works out the means

[41] Satavahana's experience bears this statement out. His queen ridicules him with the seductive statement *udakaih sinca ma ma tvam mam ityuktam maya hi tat*—alliteration so caustic that it starts the king off on his path of transformation toward real knowledge. He has little choice, for the queen has taunted him with his innocence of grammar: *murkhas tvam katham idrsah*, "How can you be such an idiot?"

for regular transition from the human to the divine; or he could be said to restore the original divinity to its holistic origins, thereby dissolving apparent boundaries, divisions, or (my preferred term) frames. In this, ancient Indian "axiality" may differ from prevalent types elsewhere, which insist on fracture and fissure in the cosmos as primary features of a cognitive "breakthrough" to complexity. In contrast, Sanskrit discussions of the uses of grammar generate a perspective on the emergence of godhead as audible and cognizable surface and on the reabsorption of that surface by the whole. This may be as close as we get to "transcendence" in classical India. We should probably avoid the word.

Or we could say that language consistently triggers that emergence, and that grammar allows us to observe and partly to control this process. Hence the deep affinity between grammarians and poets. Yet language in its deeper reaches, at or beyond the limit of semanticity, is also the reflexive medium for dissolving the perceptual frame (or for reframing so as to subvert the always opaque surface). In this sense, language is very much like the footprint that precedes and generates the foot—or, to use the later idiom, like the eye seeing itself see. It is the special talent of the philosophically minded grammarian to perceive language in this, its most creative, role. Patanjali's introduction already hints clearly at this line of thought, which culminates explicitly in Bhartrhari. When a more or less illusory temporality combines with the linguistic imagination that Bhartrhari calls *bhavana*, language begins to crystallize into the familiar world, unfolding toward a pre-existing, linguistically molded telos (*artha*, both "object" and "meaning" in the Sanskrit terminology). This is what the sensitized grammarian can see—the continuous emergence from a whole and infinitely full source, innately self-transforming, into partial and superficial forms, each subsequent emergence taking apart its matrix, each eruption interweaving and interpenetrating syntactically with previous levels. The implication is that somewhere there is a restless level at which there is no frame. Here again we touch the primary "axial" insight, reworked in countless variations throughout the classical period, and also posed as the problem or idea around which communities define themselves and contest their boundaries. Contrasting articulations of this level are evident in Buddhist and Jaina definitions of reality from the final centuries BCE.

Already in Patanjali, grammar lay at the heart of a hierarchical system in which the major disciplines of Sanskrit learning had

achieved their respective autonomy vis-a-vis one another, and in which a reflexive ranking had taken effect. To place grammar at the apex or center (these two coincide) is an eloquent cultural choice that suggests, among other things, the notion of grammaticality as a primary metaphysical and cultural mode. Emergence is never without a syntax. The grammarian thus graduates into the god.

But this very logic points to a further process that also defines the "axial" dynamic in India. On the one hand, there is the process of reflexive examination, in the mode defined, and the concomitant self-definition of autonomous, hierarchically situated fields. On the other hand, the kind of "semantic relocation" of which Jan Assmann speaks (with reference to Egypt) is also clearly in evidence, though perhaps in an opposite direction from the Egyptian case. Specifically, the soteriological thrust of the ritual system—and, through the extension of the latter into Upanisadic speculations, of knowledge per se—becomes deeply integrated into grammar. Along with the distinct definition of autonomous domains we find a conflation or superimposition that makes grammar, at the center, a soteriological praxis in its own right. All major knowledge systems in classical India reproduce this dynamic.[42]

Does the ancient break between worlds become negotiable under these conditions? In some ways, yes. Grammar is an extraordinary tool. The Brahmin pandit holds it in his hand, or on his tongue. His royal patron, upon whom he may depend for his economic survival, is thus no less dependent himself.[43] His best hope may lie not in "renunciation," however this is conceived, but in the irksome task of studying grammar—preferably in one of the streamlined methods we have seen. Politics, however, has definitely been ranked somewhere lower down the scale—more precisely, it has been, as S. N. Eisenstadt says, "de-ontologized" in relation to the ontic intensity and transformative potential of the Brahmin grammarian, ritualist, or necromancer. Only in much later, medieval times is the king reinvented as a magical performer, and then, too, with the aid of the grammarian-poet. Yet even for the latter, the familiar world keeps slipping into a fatal gap. The linguistic sign, *vacaka*, eventually generates its denoted object, *vacya*—never the other way round—

[42] See Shulman (1988), 109-37.

[43] As Jan Heesterman stressed in several essays: see, for example, Heesterman (1979), 60-85.

but the two, nonetheless, generally fail to coincide. Objects, including the objective observer, rapidly fall away from the source even as they unconsciously (except for the grammarian or poet) reproduce and embody it. "You look, but you may not see the word. You listen, but you may not hear it"—as the Vedic poet warns us. The post-Vedic, "post-axial" pandit might add: "*Whoever knows thus* knows grammar, including its marks, ellipses, and lacunae and its profound, motivating tensions, internal to language itself; thus whoever knows grammar is god."

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AXIALISM AND EMPIRE

SHELDON POLLOCK*

I am one of those who have always regarded the theory of an Axial Age with a certain "dark suspicion." As usually enunciated it seemed another of Bacon's worrisome "idols of the tribe," where "the human intellect, from its peculiar nature, easily supposes a greater order and equality in things than it actually finds." In terms of cultural change, the core form of the theory regards as meaningfully synchronous—such meaning, after all, is implicit in postulating an "age"—the various new insights into human being, or "breakthroughs," that appeared in places as diverse as China, India, Israel, and Greece in the course of the first millennium before the Common Era. Whether in fact any meaning may be attributed to this synchrony is uncertain, however; indeed, it is unclear whether the conceptual innovations should even be taken as synchronous in the first place. In typical Axial Age thinking the supposed concomitance seems to have constituted an argument in itself and to have replaced the need for any causal explanation, perhaps because it is no easy task to imagine one for so global a transformation (those on offer are vague and question-begging, such as the argument of civilizational stages, which presupposes the very developmentalism it is intended to explain). As for the concomitance itself of these breakthroughs, they often appear through the clearer lens of specialist historiography to be, not so much sudden irruptions of the new, but rather spikes on a timeline of more continuous intellectual history reaching far into the past and future. If the synchrony is "mysterious" enough, as Jan Assmann seems to suggest, to require extending the epoch so far back as to encompass Pharonic Egypt, or, as implied by others, to require extending it so far forward as to encompass Islamic Iraq or even the twelfth-century "renaissance" in northern Europe—the one as preparatory event,

* I am grateful to the participants in the Florence seminar, especially Shmuel Eisenstadt and Peter Wagner, and above all to spirited postprandial discussions with Johann Arnason. My colleague Steven Collins has, as always, been very generous with his learning in early Buddhist texts and scholarship.

the others as secondary or tertiary breakthroughs—then even the mystery of synchrony vanishes and the Axial Age stretches out so as to be more or less coextensive with premodernity.[1]

It is not entirely obvious, therefore, what gain in explanatory power or expository precision will be had from using "Axial Age" as a narrowly historical category. If the quest for a temporally defined age is abandoned, axialism can still be useful as a typological category, though here too the normal acceptation may need modification. For the qualification "transcendental," repeatedly used by scholars to explain the axial breakthrough, besides being hopelessly vague, illegitimately privileges the religious, and a narrow conception of the religious at that. Benjamin Schwartz's definition of "transcendence" as "a kind of standing back and looking beyond"; his list of instances that jumbles together "Abraham's departure from Ur . . . the Buddha's more radical renunciation . . . the Greek strain toward an order beyond the Homeric gods"; and his assertion that these breakthroughs left the world "permeated with the numinous, the sacred, and the mythic," exhibit most of the difficulties I have in mind.[2] Far more useful as a heuristic is the understanding of the axial moment proposed by Björn Wittrock, as a point of emergence, marking a historic rupture, of a new or intensified *mentalité* comprising elements of reflexivity, historicity, and agentiality.[3] When they are understood typologically and under this description, there can be no doubt that "axial" moments exist at various times in history, and that Buddhist thinkers produced one such moment in early South Asia, effecting as they did a fundamental conceptual revolution in each of the three domains just noted.

However, if early Buddhism suggests that with respect to *culture* generally speaking axialism can be typologically consistent even if it may be historically unsystematic, so to speak—given that axial moments as stipulated above occurred autonomously and across several millennia—the reverse appears to be the case with respect to *power*: Although axial theory, so far as I can gauge it, is less ex-

[1] See Assmann's contribution to this volume; also Hodgson cited below (n. 24), and Brown's remarks on the transformations in the twelfth century that are "strangely germane" to axial theory (1975), 133. Wagner (this volume) notes the elasticity of the Axial Age. Benjamin Schwartz recognized all these problems, along with the "dark suspicion" of the doubters, but soldiered on with the axial concept nonetheless (Schwartz 1975).

[2] Schwartz (1975), 3.

[3] See Björn Wittrock's paper in this volume.

plicit about the place to be accorded new forms of the political principle (some scholars even want to place these new forms at the end of the Axial Age), a stronger argument for historical coherence in innovation may be made here than in the domain of *mentalités*. In the course of the first millennium BCE there came into being a new and highly consequential model of polity—in some ways, a foundational model for the culture-power orders involved—that envisioned political rule as essentially and necessarily translocal rather than local; and this vision was to be re-enacted, not autonomously but by a process of historical imitation, across much of Eurasia for the next half-millennium (and then, to be sure, by yet a further process of imitation, in the modern epoch). The origin of the model in the western Eurasian world lies with the Achaemenids, who created what has recently been described as the "first political world-empire," and what at the time was seen as something unprecedented—by Herodotus, for example, who in 440 BCE attributed to Xerxes the intention to

> extend the Persian territory as far as God's heaven reaches. The sun will then shine on no land beyond our borders; for I will pass through Europe from one end to the other, and . . . make of all the lands which it contains one country.[4]

Yet if with respect to power axial theory has a certain *historical* salience—power was newly reconceptionalized as transregional beginning around 500 BCE and in emulation of this primal instance reproduced as such in the course of the next five or more centuries in places as diverse as India, Greece, and Rome—it is *typologically* unsystematic. The historical regularity of the empire-model is not matched by any deep contentual uniformity, aside from this transregionality itself. The ways of being imperial were very various—assumptions in axial theory notwithstanding, such as the view of Karl Jaspers himself, popularizer of the idea of axialism. Jaspers asserted that one feature of the Axial Age is a new socio-political formation consisting in "the genesis of *peoples* who feel themselves a unity with a common *language*, a common *culture*, and a common body of *myths*." But were we to accept this characterization, we would have to conclude that nothing like an Axial Age occurred, in India at least, prior to the twentieth century.[5] To formulate this typological inconsistency

[4] *Historia* Book 7 (tr. Rawlinson); for the recent judgment, Fowden (1993), 6.
[5] Jaspers (1953), 45.

more generally, if in some places the imperial political principle was thought of as related to the religious, in particular the ecumenicism of the new "world religions," this was not necessarily so elsewhere, certainly not in early South Asia, again *pace* received opinion. There is thus some irony, and no little complication, in the fact that what is typologically a decidedly axial moment of culture, the conceptual revolution of Buddhism, produced no enduring inflection in what is historically a decidedly axial moment of power, the empire-form of polity in early South Asia. In fact, Buddhist thinkers spectacularly failed to give, as they clearly hoped to give, a specifically Buddhist content to the form of power in mainland South Asia. Accordingly, alternative explanations of imperial practices need to be elaborated, along with alternative models of the relationship of culture and power beyond those familiar from western history and the Euro-American social theory that this produced.

I want to explore this paradox in the conception of axialism by first demonstrating the typologically axial character of early Buddhism. This can be done more or less telegraphically, since much of the basic substance of Buddhism is familiar, though the focal points of the approach adopted here differ entirely from previous discussions of the topic. The contrasts in the empire-form itself are less familiar, however, and so the greater part of the paper will be devoted to charting, in a historical-comparative spirit, several exemplary varieties and their genealogies. Let me note, too, my usual proviso that this essay in comparative empire-forms is not meant to be a merely antiquarian exercise. Both because the divergent modes of realizing the imperial political principle in South Asia and Europe have had reverberations across history and because they demonstrate the existence as such of alternative possibilities in transregional polity, studying them is meant as a form of "actionable" history, an attempt to produce statements about past events that can inform the conduct of present practices.[6]

Axial Culture in Buddhist India: A Transvaluation of All Values

Buddhism has long figured as a core component in the theorization of the Axial Age in general and in its Indian manifestation in par-

[6] This specific formulation is owing to Tony Bennett (1990), 277. The observations here on Rome and India are expanded from their first schematic presentation in Pollock (2002), 23-28.

ticular. It was one of the central exhibits in Jaspers' founding enunciation of 1953 (1949), a position reaffirmed in Schwartz's conference proceedings of 1975, and in Shmuel Eisenstadt's reconsideration of the theme in the edited volumes he published from 1986-92. Not everyone, of course, has seen Buddhism as constituting the "whole truth" of the axial moment in early South Asia. Eisenstadt himself first categorized Buddhism as a "secondary breakthrough" while assessing late Vedic thought as wholly "axial" (an assessment that cannot be sustained according to the typology offered above). More specifically, Jan Heesterman has argued that it was the "gap" between Vedic revelation and ritual routinization, where rational order replaced "unsettling . . . revelatory vision," that constituted India's "axial turning point," a conception again too vague to be of much use. Where Buddhism has been placed at the center of discussion, this was often more on account of its practices than on account of its precepts. Hermann Kulke has thus laid stress on the sociality of early Buddhism that led to the institutionalization of the "transcendental breakthrough" (not further elucidated), singling out three aspects in particular: the "republic"-like religious assembly (that is, the *saṅgha)*; the democratizing promulgation of doctrine; and the development of a lay community of co-religionists (*upāsaka*).[7] The contours of what is typologically representative of Axial theory in the *conceptual* revolution that Buddhism effected have yet, so far as I can see, to be distinctly traced.

In fact, this sort of conceptual map is a desideratum not only for a systematic presentation of Axial typologies, but for Indological scholarship itself. No adequately detailed and textually sensitive account is available of what the critique enunciated by the early Buddhists meant within the larger intellectual history of South Asia, for which the very underdevelopment of this history is itself partly to blame. The chronological development of basic doctrines of Mīmāṃsā, for example, the core science of Vedic discourse (*vākyaśāstra*), remains unclear in itself let alone in relation to Buddhism.[8]

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[7] Jaspers (1953), passim (entirely superficial references), also Schwartz, ed. (1975), 1-7 and the contribution of Thapar; Eisenstadt, ed. (1986), in particular 291-305 (here the concept of axiality itself becomes scarcely distinguishable from civilizational identity); (1992), vol. 3, 9-149, especially the essay by Bechert; Heesterman (1986), 394-95; Kulke (1986), 390. Tambiah (1986), 453 ff. has little discernible connection with the problematic of axialism.

[8] Though see now Bronkhorst (2001).

While there can be hardly any doubt that the principal thrust of the Buddhist critique was directed toward actually-existing elements of the thought-world of early Brahmanism, it also seems likely that at least some of the most salient articulations of this world, what we now tend to think of as its foundational principles, may have first been conceptualized as a defensive, even anti-axial, reaction to Buddhism. At the very least we can say some of these principles were formulated dialectically in a polemic with Buddhist critics (one that was to continue for centuries, reaching its high-water mark only a millennium later, in the seventh-century agon of Kumārila and Dharmakīrti). It is self-evident that no one would elaborate propositions of the sort we find Mīmāṃsā to have elaborated, such as the thesis of the authorlessness of the Veda, unless the authority of the Veda and its putative authors had first been seriously challenged.

Clearly spelling out the transvaluation of values effected by Buddhism is therefore an important task on several accounts. But its importance is matched by its difficulty, which is such that far more specialist expertise than I possess is required. I therefore offer only a sketch of what might constitute some elementary aspects of the Buddhist transvaluation: (1) the process of semantic appropriation; (2) the focalization of human agency and history; (3) the assertion of the conventionalism of social-political life in general and of cultural practices in particular (especially with reference to language); (4) the place and nature of textual articulations.

(1) A simple inventory of the ways in which at the semantic level early Buddhism sought to appropriate, redefine, and transform central components of the late *vaidika* (that is, the "Veda-derived") conceptual order shows how thorough-going the Buddhist transvaluation was. The basic procedure in evidence here is well-known from other oppositional movements in the domain of religion and culture more generally; the dynamic is perhaps best captured in Assmann's notion of "normative [or, subversive] inversion," whereby one group's rights and responsibilities are turned by another group into prohibitions and scandals (and often vice versa).[9] A preeminent instance of a substantive sort would be the Buddhist proscription of one of the great sacred mysteries in the Vedic world, animal sacrifice. In the *Kuṭadanta Sutta*, for example, a Brahman is dissuaded from his

[9] Assmann (1997) and elsewhere in his oeuvre.

original intention to offer a blood sacrifice—described, with grotesque hyperbole far beyond actual *vaidika* practice, as consisting of the slaughter of a hundred bulls, a hundred steers, a hundred heifers, a hundred goats, and a hundred rams—by the tale of a far more successful sacrifice where

> neither were any oxen slain, neither goats, nor fowls, nor fatted pigs, nor were any kinds of living creatures put to death. No trees were cut down to be used as posts, no Dabbha grasses mown to strew around the sacrificial spot. And the staves and messengers and workmen there employed were driven neither by rods nor fear, nor carried on their work weeping with tears upon their faces. Whoso chose to help, he worked; whoso chose not to help, worked not. What each chose to do, he did, what they chose not to do, that was left undone. With ghee, and oil, and butter, and milk, and honey, and sugar only was that sacrifice.[10]

But even this kind of sacrifice—where we can observe how nonviolence is coupled with noncoercion, another major ethical inversion of the early Buddhists—is shown in the sequel to be more difficult and less successful than a whole range of other "sacrifices" that are centered on Buddhist moral practices, entrance into the Buddhist order, and Buddhist forms of meditation.

At the more intimate level of doctrinal terminology other illustrations abound, less obvious but no less significant. Notice first the very name chosen for the Buddha's teaching, *dharma* (Pali *dhamma*), or even more combatively, *saddharma*, the real or true *dharma* (already in the oldest parts of the Pali canon). *Dharma* is of course the keyword of Vedic ritualism. An ancient, even primary, meaning of the term—present in the very first words of the *Mīmāṃsāsūtra*, "Now, then, the inquiry into *dharma*"—is in fact sacrifice, and so refers precisely to what early Buddhism most fundamentally rejected. In the *Brahmaṇadhammika Sutta, dharma* itself is said to disappear from the world the moment Brahmans commenced animal sacrifice (the practice was unknown previously and was devised only as a means for gaining bigger sacrificial fees). Even the term's somewhat later sense of "duty" as an expression of one's essential nature is turned into its opposite in the anti-essentialist Buddhist appropriation.[11] Sim-

[10] Tr. Rhys Davids (*Sacred Books of the Buddhists Volume II, Dialogues of the Buddha, Part I,* [141] 18).

ilarly transgressive borrowings are *ārya*, which was recoded from its old meaning "noble," that is, a member of a "twice-born" social order, to "adherent" (a transformation reminiscent of that of the term *junzi* in early Confucianism); *ārṣa*, which, originally meaning "relating to the sages [*ṛṣi*]" and thereby referring to the Veda, was appropriated as an epithet of the Buddha; *dakṣiṇā*, a "payment to a priest for sacrificial services" in the Vedic world, which became "merit accrued from giving gifts" in the Buddhist. Even more striking is the case of the Pali word *sutta*, which refers to the discourses of the Buddha: It is has recently been argued that this is a dialectal variant, not as long assumed of Sanskrit *sūtra* (that is, a précis of any form of systematic knowledge), but rather of Sanskrit *sūktā*, literally "well-spoken" but specifically connoting a Vedic hymn. In a related if less developed way, the Buddhist idea of three knowledges (*vijjā*)—of one's former lives, of the lives of others, and of the Four Noble Truths—may very well have been intended "to parallel and trump" the *vidyātraya*, or triple knowledge, of the Brahmans (that is, knowledge of the three Vedas). More subtly, the notion of (ritual) action at the heart of the term *karma* in the *vaidika* world is replaced by (spiritual) intention in Pali *kamma*.[12] These positive inversions or transvaluations in early Buddhism of core *vaidika* values are complemented by a range of pure negations; foremost among these is *an-atta* (*an-ātma*), the denial of a personal essence whereby the fundamental conception of Upanishadic thought is cancelled. All this evidence suggests that semantically Buddhism sought to turn the old *vaidika* world upside down by the very levers offered by the *vaidika* world.

(2) At the heart of the reinterpretation of human being in the discourse of Buddhism lie a type of rational agentiality unprecedented

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[11] For *dharma* as "sacrifice" see e.g. *Ṛgveda* 10.90.16; for the *Brahmaṇadhammika Sutta* see *Sutta Nipāta* 2.7, vv. 295 ff., especially v. 316. Mīmāṃsā sought for centuries to come to limit the enlargement of the term's semantic realm (as for example in the *Pūrvottaramīmāṃsāvādanakṣatramālā* 254-57, a treatise of the sixteenth-century thinker Appayya Dīkṣita; see Pollock [in press]).

[12] For *ārya* (*ariya*), see Deshpande (1979), 40-41; for *ārṣa*, Lüders (1940), 712-714; for *sūkta* (*sutta*), Gombrich 1990: 23. The triple knowledges of Buddhism in reference to Brahmanism, and the transformation of *karma/kamma*, are noted by Gombrich (1996), 29 and 51-52 respectively. Norman curiously misses most of these instances, but provides one important addition, *nhātaka/snātaka*, transformed from "one who engages in ritual bathing" to "one who washes off evil by means off the Eight-fold Path" ([1993], 276).

in the earlier Indian thought-world and an equally unprecedented understanding of the historicity of human life that such agentiality makes evident. Consider the Four Noble Truths themselves, the distillate of the Buddha's teachings: first, that the human condition is one of suffering; second, that suffering arises; third, that accordingly it must be capable of being ended; fourth, that it must be susceptible to some procedure for ending it. Although the relationship of the Four Truths to the more narrowly physiological doctrine of the earlier Indic medical tradition has long been assumed, what is being offered is a new, as it were performable, analysis of the human condition. The procedure, or Way, toward which this points is itself subject to further rational explanation and enactment—the Eight-fold Path—and is fully elaborated in the theory of *pratītya-samutpāda*, or dependent origination. According to this concept, action requires an understanding of causal relationships, and the action intended to end suffering requires a grasp of how ignorance leads to karmic conditioning, which leads to consciousness, and so on through the twelve stages ending with old age, suffering, and death.[13]

To stress this dimension of what might be called the voluntarism of early Buddhism is not to imply that the Vedic belief system saw action as will-less or mechanical: If Mīmāṃsā, the theory of the Veda, is about anything it is about the nature of deontic language, the obligation to act that the Veda places upon members of the *vaidika* community, the resolve (*saṃkalpa*) one must make to act, and so on. But as Mīmāṃsā itself is very careful to explain—and indeed, is very rational when explaining—the truth-value of such paradigmatic Vedic commandments as "He who desires heaven must sacrifice" derives directly from the fact that their substance *exceeds* the rational, instrumental understanding—precisely the understanding that underpins any authentic form of agentiality. The Veda's injunction to act is meaningful precisely because it enunciates something that transcends the phenomenal, something inaccessible to observation, inference, or other form of empirical reasoning—something, in fact, irrational.[14]

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[13] The twelve-fold linkage in the *pratītyasamutpāda* doctrine has homologies in Vedic thought but means to negate what is central to that thought, the perduring self (*ātman*), so Jurewicz (2000). The relationship (or lack of it) between early Buddhism and medical discourse is discussed by Collins (1998), 230 (with references).

[14] Or, as the equally rationalistic Tertullian would have put it, *credibile quia ineptum est*: It is reason that dictates belief in a thing in direct proportion to the

The most direct manifestation of the rational agentiality of Buddhism (here the coeval movement of Jainism could be brought into the discussion) is arguably to be found in the very idea of *śaraṇāgamana*, "taking refuge with the Buddha," in other words, "conversion" (if this concept is not too historically specific to find application in Indian Buddhism). The *vaidika* world seems to have been one of pure Bourdieuean *doxa*, where both the order of society and one's place in it went without saying, and where accordingly the possibility of reordering society and self—indeed, of choosing a new self beyond the ascribed and a new society beyond the natal—was outside the conceptual scheme. (Even renouncing society and self was routinized as normative.) If historically exogenous communities were eventually incorporated in some measure in the *vaidika* social sphere, nowhere and never did this process have an evangelical dimension. Attracting monastic and lay members somehow to the new community, however, seems to have been a value of Buddhism from the start. To read the accounts—entirely legendary though they probably are—of the Buddha's progress through north India, where villages were emptied of their youths, who elected to follow the Buddha and join the *saṅgha*, is to get a sense of what the new agentiality meant as an ideal in practice, "as a personal and individual decision," and of its universal applicability.[15] Presumably closely related to the acknowledgement of the capacity for willed change epitomized in the act of choosing to affiliate oneself to the Buddhist order is the fact that early Buddhism developed historical accounts of this order, Pali *vamsa* literature, which represent the first (nondynastic) historiographical tradition in South Asia. In this again like the Jains, Buddhists would be concerned with the progress of their faith in time and space for centuries to come.[16]

(3) It is in complete harmony with the causal analysis of the human predicament that the Buddha and his disciples developed a wide-ranging understanding of contingency or conventionalism in human life, in opposition to the naturalization of the *vaidika* thought-world.

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thing's improbability (see Sider (1980). On the Mīmāṃsā principle *adṛṣṭe śāstram arthavat*, see Pollock (1990).

[15] See the sensible remarks of Bechert (1992), 18 (quoted in the text). The problem of conversion in early Buddhism remains oddly understudied for India (for China, however, Zürcher [1959], and for Tibet, see Kapstein [2000]). Some scholars even deny that exclusivist allegiance was at issue, a view that seems to me simply contrarian.

[16] On the early histories see Collins (1998), 254 ff., and Walters (2000).

In respect to the dominant representations of that world two dimensions of Buddhist conventionalism seem especially important: one that pertains to the origin and character of social-political life in general and an another, to the nature and function of language in particular.

Perhaps no two texts more effectively demonstrate how this conventionalist critique manifests itself in the analysis of society and polity, and better reveal the transgressive nature of early Buddhism, than the *Aggañña Sutta*, the "Discourse on What is Primary," and the *Cakkavatti Sihanāda Sutta*, "The Discourse (containing) a Lion's Roar on the Wheel-turning King."[17] Both can also be seen as offering extended exemplification of the doctrine of *pratītyasamutpāda* at the level of the body politic: When in the *Aggañña Sutta* the young Brahman converts complain of the disdain with which their apostasy is regarded by their former castemen prideful of social superiority, the Buddha explains the entirely contingent nature of all social categories, and the process of social evolution through which this contingency manifests itself. The Brahman is not superior biogenetically; indeed, "Brahman" is shown (by etymology) not even to be a natural kind, he is simply one who "keeps away from bad things," as the true Shudra is anyone who "leads a cruel, mean life." The target of this discourse is of course the discourse of the celebrated Rigvedic text, the *Puruṣasūkta*, "The Hymn to the Primal Being." Here the natural and social worlds are represented as entirely congruent products of a primeval cosmogonic sacrifice, and the hierarchy and stability of the social orders are sheer givens; the Brahman was made from the Puruṣa's mouth and the Shudra from his feet with the same ineluctable necessity whereby the moon was engendered from his mind and the sun born from his eye. The sacrifice of the Puruṣa and the fixed social order that thereby emerged seem almost recombined in the Mīmāṃsā doctrine of the fixity of the right to sacrifice, *adhikāra*, which was reserved to the three twice-born orders.

Analogously, in the "Lion's Roar," when the eighth in a lineage of kings fails to consult his father and to learn from him the correct ways of rule, he neglects to give money to the poor, and from this "Poverty flourished; because poverty flourished, theft flourished; because theft flourished, armed violence flourished . . ." whereas the

[17] Fundamental here is Collins (1998), 480 ff.; see also Gombrich (1992).

reverse sequence occurs when he follows the old tradition of rule.[18] Nothing mysterious let alone numinous attaches to good or bad governance; the causal linkages are as intelligible as is the social contract by which the ruler in the *Aggañña Sutta*, the *Mahāsammata* (the one "greatly approved [by the people]") is appointed to protect society. Choices good or bad, not necessity, are what characterizes human life, and choice is of course susceptible to an analysis of the conditions of choosing, so that the good may be secured and the bad avoided.

A fundamental correlate of this new realism, or social conventionalism, was the Buddhist critique of the *vaidika* view of language, especially the theory of signification as argued out by Mīmāṃsā. This critique needs far deeper historicization than it has received to date, but its lineaments are clear, and point up a contrast in positions as sharp as it is possible to get. Against the Mīmāṃsā tenet that the relationship between word and meaning is *autpattika*, "originary" or natural—a primal, necessary, and non-arbitrary relationship (sometimes absurdly reduced by its opponents to a mechanical, even magical view of reference)—Buddhists typically argued for a relationship based on pure convention (*saṅketa*, also *avadhi*).[19] What was at stake for Mīmāṃsā in asserting the uncreated, eternal nature of language is the possibility that *vāṅmaya*, or a thing-made-of-language—that is, a text, like the Veda—could be eternal too, something the Buddhists sought fundamentally to reject. About the fact that nothing in language generally or in Sanskrit particularly is transcendent, Buddhist doctrine is unambiguous. Here again we encounter the subversive inversion of *vaidika* terminology in a way that must have resonated scandalously in the minds of twice-born candidates

[18] Tr. Collins (1998), 607.

[19] The Mīmāṃsā doctrine is found in theoretical discourse first in *Pūrvamīmāṃsā-sūtra* 1.1.5. No adequate historical scholarship on the Buddhist view is available. The notion of *saṅketa* and related terms seems nowhere to be fully developed in the extant sources; the earliest references are relatively late and thin (*Abhidharmakośa* 2.47, ed. Varanasi, 272, 275; *Pramāṇavārttika* 3.92, ed. Gnoli 1.92). Early Pali texts do not comment on the matter; later Pali grammars are however unequivocal, e.g., *Saddanīti* 636.26, 786.5: *saṅketaniruḷho saddo attheṣu ti* ("The signifier is related to the signified as a matter of pure convention"). The Buddhist *saṅketa* is related to, and perhaps the source of, the *samaya* of early Nyāya (*Nyāyasūtra* 2.1.55), an issue I cannot discuss here, nor the relationship between semantic conventionalism and the concept of *apoha* (on which see most recently Tillemans, [2000], especially 220-223).

for membership: "All mental formations" (*sarve saṃskārāḥ*, *sabbe saṃkhārā*)—in fact, all things formed, no doubt including all Vedic rites (*saṃskāra*) and perhaps even Sanskrit itself (*saṃskṛta)*—"are non-eternal"; they arise and having arisen, disappear. It was again fully in keeping with such a theory of language that the early Buddhists rejected the use of Sanskrit, the language of the gods, whether in favor of local dialects or Pali, a new hieratic competitor language. It is no small measure of the exhaustion of the Axial energies of early Buddhism that around the beginning of the Common Era in the north at least this old opposition was abandoned and the repressed returned: Buddhists turned to Sanskrit with a vengeance, translating their canon into the language.

(4) The very fact of the existence of a canon of Buddhist sacred texts is the final typologically Axial property I want to consider. The textual articulations of early Buddhism recapitulate many of the tendencies discussed so far. The creation of a Pali canon seems to have been a response to the presence of organized Vedic text-corpora. In its very structure, it embodies a range of Vedic architectonic principles, such as the arranging of texts in increasing segments, in the same way as we have seen it appropriate the genre title of *sūkta* (*sutta*).[20] There are stark and instructive differences as well, however, that conform with other aims. The Vedic corpus increasingly sought to escape confinement in any spatiotemporal framework, and fully articulated this desire in the doctrine of the uncreatedness of the Vedic texts (based on the *śabdārthautpattikasaṃbandha*, or the originary character of the relationship of signifier and signified): Vedic texts are *apauruṣeya*, produced by no author human or divine, and existing outside of all history whether cosmic or terrestrial.[21] Buddhist holy texts, on the other hand, typically specify the place, time, audience, and of course speaker—the Buddha—thereby enmeshing the very truth of the message in its concrete historicity.

Two observations on the Buddhist critique noted earlier merit restating at this point. First, there was something of a dialectical process at work in this intellectual history: It was almost certainly in response to the disenchantment of the *vaidika* world effected by Buddhism, above all perhaps by the new reflexivity and conception of human agency it offered, that *vaidika* thought itself developed some

[20] Gombrich (1990) 23-24.
[21] Pollock (1989).

of the more distinctive characteristics that were to mark it long into the future. The explicit formulation of what are now rightly regarded as axioms that reified the social world and the world of discourse—the right to offer sacrifice, *adhikāra*, for example, or the view of a primeval linkage of word and meaning capable of grounding an authorless and eternal Veda—likely developed in response to the Buddhist critique, even if the proclivities behind them were deeply rooted in a web of *vaidika* cultural convictions. For none of these axioms makes much sense in the absence of contestation to the contrary. Second, even though the basic oppositions at issue in categories such as *autpattika/ kṛtaka* (natural/ factitious), may remind us of similar disputes elsewhere in the ancient world—such as that in fifth-century Greek thought (powerfully formulated in Plato's *Cratylus*) over whether signifiers and signifieds were connected to each other by nature (*physis*) or convention (*nomos*)—the stakes of the debate in early South Asia were far higher. The Greek debate may also be extended beyond the bounds of language analysis so as to include crucial questions of justice, but the philosophical positions in India were expressions of radically different visions of life, of separate and apparently irreconcilable understandings of human being and destiny.[22]

If the above account has some validity, and if, accordingly, Buddhism represents a typologically axial phenomenon in respect of its *mentalité*, we shall see that, with respect to the creation of a related axial form of polity, it contributed nothing, or at least nothing that would find any long-term resonance in India. In fact, the most interesting thing about Buddhism in the present context is the disconnect it evinced between the spheres of culture and power. Wholly countervailing tendencies seem to present themselves, between a truly universalist "Sangha of the Four Quarters" and what we will see to have been a political vision that was "universalist" only within definite limits. If it is correct, as many believe, "that there is a (more or less potential) Buddhist imperial claim of which Aśoka is the originary paradigm," this was a claim never demonstrably actualized in India itself—with the sole exception of Aśoka—or perhaps anywhere

[22] Sophists like Callicles contended that the law, *nomos*, was actually a conspiracy of the weak against the strong, who by nature, *physis*, would always possess more than the weak (Plato's *Gorgias* 482c-484c).

else.[23] In other words, power as a set of real practices in which this claim would have been cashed out never became demonstrably Buddhist in India. The contradiction here, between a religious community that knew no boundaries and polities that always did, is only one of several that confront us in reconsidering the origin and diffusion of the imperial form in the Axial Age.

Axialism and Empire

Many scholars who have written on the subject of the Axial Age have assumed a close, even causal relationship between the emergence of the new *mentalités* and especially religious consciousness—of the sort just described in the case of Buddhism—and the empire-form. The first was Jaspers himself, who juxtaposed the rise of "mighty empires" and the new "spiritualization" of the age, though seeing these political forms as a response to the "anarchy" unleashed by axial thought. For Eric Voegelin, the political struggle of the Achaemenid empire against hostile nations was a "transposition" of the cosmic struggle of good (Ahuramazda) against evil (Ahriman). With more focused vision Marshall Hodgson addressed the problem in the Near East, arguing that "Empires were built . . . [that] tended to found themselves, at best, on some elements of the best philosophic thinking in their respective regions." Heesterman saw an even greater complementarity to the relationship in India (and in this he is surely typical), with empire at once embodying and promoting the new Buddhist universalism: "Buddhism . . . becomes intimately connected with the Maurya empire that arose together with other new empires at the end of the Axial Age. Giving the empire a new ethical legitimation, Buddhism owes to the empire the realization of its universalistic claim . . . The pattern for a new type of universalistic imperial policy . . . was set."[24]

Underlying the connection these and other scholars have drawn between the axial spiritual breakthrough and empire are two important assumptions, one more obvious and explicit in the literature, the other less so. The first is that empire constitutes a set of prac-

[23] See Walters (1998), 23 ff.

[24] Jaspers (1953), 3-6, 45-46; Voegelin (1956), 47; Hodgson (1974), 118 ff.; Heesterman (1986), 383. See also Schwartz (1975), 2.

tices in the domain of power that embody the transcendence held to be intrinsic to the new religious consciousness, though it is not always made clear whether the relationship between transcendence and polity is understood by analogy (that the limitlessness of the applicability of a religious truth finds expression in the limitlessness of the application of political power), by homology (that one supreme god in heaven, polytheistically or monotheistically viewed, is mirrored by one supreme king on earth), or in some other manner.[25] One careful study of prenational polity expressed this relationship between power and culture as follows:

> Transcendental myths attributing universal sacral qualities to the empire by asserting that it was the terrestrial reflection of divine order had been potent instruments for transforming collections of minor polities . . . into large, compound polities. Later imperial polities in the ancient Middle East and the Hellenistic period systematized this legitimizing *mythomoteur* on a quasi-secular basis. The Roman empire constituted the culmination of this dilution of a sacral myth by appeals to the supreme value of order and prosperity.[26]

Put in the most general terms (though the idea actually predates the axial theory itself, having been intimated already by Max Weber), the roots of the reordering of polity in, or as the outcome of, the Axial Age are to be located "in the conception of the relation between the political and the higher transcendental order."[27] The second assumption, one less clearly articulated perhaps but nonetheless widespread—I have seen it nowhere openly challenged—is that (post-)axial empires, emerging out of the same putative causal matrix of this transcendental breakthrough, were basically comparable as both political and ideological formations: in respect of territorial infinitude, for example, or the "extreme centralization" of

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[25] Influential interpretations of the relationship of empire to polytheism, and monotheism are offered by Momigliano (1987) and Fowden (1993), especially 37 ff. (and, to dualism, by Voegelin [1956], 46 ff.), yet these are curiously elusive. Momigliano does not make clear what "disadvantages" for a universal state are owing to monotheism; Frowden argues that polytheist universalism "did not impart motive or expansive force to empire even to the limited extent that Christianity would" (57), implying— the overall claim of the book notwithstanding—that both religious ideologies were irrelevant to political practice.

[26] Armstrong (1982), 165. The last part of this statement may be seriously doubted; contrast Fowden (1993), 37 ff.

[27] See, for instance, Weber (1978), vol. 1, 418. The quote is from Eisenstadt (1986), 8.

the political structure, or the "absolute power" and divinization of the emperor.[28]

Both these assumptions about the historical realizations of the empire-principle need to be reconsidered. The most consequential forms of imperial polity in mainland South Asia seem to have owed nothing to religious universalism or transcendentalism. It is true that Buddhism—to continue with that example, since no polity ever paid the least attention to the second (supposed) form of the axial *mentalité* in India, Upanishadic monism—continued to enjoy royal patronage throughout the first millennium. Yet no Buddhist empire, in any acceptable sense of the phrase, was ever to reappear in India after the fleeting moment of Aśoka (assuming for the sake of argument that this even was a Buddhist empire) or indeed even in Southeast Asia, where the belief-system never provided the basis for transregional political unity. Among the Kuṣāṇas in the north or the Sātavāhanas in the Deccan (early centuries of the Common Era), in Harṣa's Kanauj (mid-seventh century), even in Pāla Bengal (last quarter of the millennium), precious little that can be identified as "Buddhist" can be found in their actual practices of governance. And as little as universalistic Buddhism shaped the actual practices of imperial rule among the Pālas, the Puṣyabhūtis, Sātavāhanas, or Kuṣāṇas, so little did cosmic Shaivism, or Vaishnavism, or Jainism—cosmic rather than universalist, since none of these systems saw evangelizing as a core concern—differentiate the practices of any other post-Aśokan transregional political formation. If there is any determining religious dimension to rulership it seems to have been Brahmanical ritualism.[29]

Furthermore, beyond certain components such as the development of a supralocal language and highly self-conscious literary culture, in neither its semantics nor its pragmatics does empire in early South Asia have much in common with the orders of culture-power constructed elsewhere around the same time, most notably the *imperi-*

[28] I cite from the recent synthetic account of empire in van Creveld (1999), 35-52 (46, and cf. 41).

[29] Buddhist inflections of political theory are found elsewhere to be sure, in Sri Lanka (see Lingat [1989]), for example, or Thailand, though even here Brahman ritualism at court remained common; again, Bechert is worth consulting on all this (1992), 23 ff. A new chapter in political history begins with the *regional* kingdoms of the Vernacular Age. Here the Gajapatis of Orissa and their relationship with the Jagannātha cult may be taken as representative; see for example Kulke (1979) and Berkemer (1993).

um romanum. Much has been written on the problem of categorizing political forms across cultures, and the conceptual difficulties encountered when we try to think outside the box of dominant models—of "nation" beyond the form of the western European exemplar, for example, or indeed of "empire" beyond the model of Rome.[30] If we must perforce use the same terminology to describe it, this should not lead us to ignore the possibility that the empire-form across world areas may have been filled with radically different content. And there is accordingly reason to believe that, far from emerging orthogenetically from any single ideational or even material matrix—that of an axial breakthrough in spiritual consciousness in the one case, that of "tangible" factors such as the control of nomadism in the other[31]—the rise of the empire-form in southern Eurasia may be more cogently ascribed to altogether different forms of social change, whether synchronic or diachronic. One may be "peer-polity interaction," a notion developed in recent studies of early European archaeology; another, historical imitation, whereby the style if not the structure of imperial rule is consciously adopted and adapted from preeminent exemplars of the past.[32] This latter process, a potentially significant dimension of political action but one that is still poorly understood, is not helpfully explained from an externalist perspective, as for example in the Marxian trope of the farce that follows tragedy (where all political actors are con artists, who "anxiously conjure up the spirits of the past," using "time-honored disguise and borrowed language," Luther with the mask of the Apostle Paul, the Revolution of 1789-1814 "draped in the guise" of the Roman Republic and then Empire). It is much better understood from within the subjective horizon of the agents as a kind of ethno-theory of practice.

These questions can be illuminated by some comparative reflec-

[30] For the general problem of defining empire see Duverger (1980), 5-23, and more recently Morrison (2001), 1-9; also Pollock (1998). When Woolf writes "Rome was more than simply a typical early empire: in some senses it was an archetypal one," he captures at once the scholarly problem of taxonomy and the historical dimension of emulation (Woolf [2001], 311 ff.). The resolutely Romanocentric imperial vision of Hardt and Negri (2000) is the most recent descendent of this imitative tradition.

[31] So already Jaspers (1953), 45-46.

[32] For the first, see Renfrew and Cherry (1986); for the second, I am aware of no large-scale interpretation; Pagden (1995) considers the colonial European imitation of the classical empire form.

tions on the Indian and Roman empire-forms both as discourse and as practice. I examine four different features, some in less detail that I have discussed elsewhere, others in more: language and especially literary culture; territoriality; governance; and what may be called the ethno-transcendent, that is, the political place of the (tribal or local) deity become God in the (post-)axial world. The aim is to try to provide some of the "contrasts and parallels between the most far-reaching changes" in the civilizational traditions, some sense of the "different patterns of interrelations between new cultural patterns and changing power structures" that were identified as key objectives in this exercise in rethinking the axial paradigm.[33] At the same time, I want to suggest something of the imitative quality of the reproduction of the imperial form, as well as the centrality of empire as a historical component to a reconfigured theory of axialism.

Axial Empire-Forms

First let us consider, on the basis of two key texts, the kind of empire-form that arose during the Axial Age itself and that at its end would be replaced by more achieved forms, after, however, having established certain tendencies—quite divergent tendencies—that would be preserved in subsequent traditions. The first text is the celebrated Behistūn inscription of Darius I, the fourth overlord of the Achaemenid Empire (its dates are c. 550-330; those of Darius himself, 522-486):

> (1) I am Darius, the great king, king of kings (*xšāyatha xšāyathiy*), the king of Persia, the king of countries, the son of Hystaspes, the grandson of Arsames, the Achaemenian. (2) Proclaims Darius the King (*thātiy dārayavahuš xšāyathiya*): My father is Hystaspes; the father of Hystaspes was Arsames; Arsames' father was Ariaramnes; Ariaramnes' father was Teispes; Teispes' father was Achaemenes (3) Proclaims Darius the King: That is why we are called Achaemenians; from antiquity we have been noble; from antiquity has our dynasty been royal . . . (5) Proclaims Darius the King: By the grace of Ahuramazda am I king; Ahuramazda has granted me the kingdom (*xšaśam*). (6) Proclaims Darius the King: These are the countries which are subject unto me, and by the grace of Ahuramazda I became king of them: Persia, Elam, Babylonia, Assyria,

[33] See the general introduction to this volume.

> Arabia, Egypt, the countries by the sea, Lydia, the Greeks, Media, Armenia, Cappadocia, Parthia, Drangiana, Aria, Chorasmia, Bactria, Sogdiana, Gandhara, Scythia, Sattagydia, Arachosia and Maka; twenty-three lands in all. (7) Proclaims Darius the King: These are the countries which are subject to me; by the grace of Ahuramazda they became subject to me; they brought tribute unto me. Whatsoever commands have been laid on them by me, by night or by day, have been performed by them.[34]

The second text is from the equally well-known rock edicts of Aśoka, third overlord of the Maurya empire (its dates are c. 320-150 BCE; those of Aśoka himself 268-227):

> Beloved of the Gods, King Piyadasi, proclaims thus (*devānaṃpiye piyadassi lājā evaṃ āhā*) . . . Everywhere within the conquered realm (*savata vijitamhi* [etc.]) of the Beloved of the Gods, King Piyadasi, and among the people beyond the borders, the Cholas, the Pandyas, the Satiyaputras, the Keralaputras, as far as Tamraparni [Sri Lanka] and where the Greek king Antiochos rules, and among the kings who are neighbors of Antiochos. . . .
>
> [Conquest by *dhamma*] has been won here, on the borders, even six hundred leagues (*yojana*) away, where the Greek king Antiochos rules, beyond there where the four kings named Ptolemy, Antigonos, Magas and Alexander rule, likewise in the south among the Cholas, the Pandyas, and as far as Tamraparni. Here in the king's conquered realm (*vijaye*) among the Greeks, the Kambojas, the Nabhakas, the Nabhapamktis, the Bhojas, the Pitinikas, the Andhras and the Palidas, everywhere people are following the instructions in *dhamma* of the Beloved of the Gods.[35]

In 519 BCE Darius had his inscription carved on a sheer rock face 100 meters above the ground, virtually illegible from any vantage point; a work for the eye of God, one might have thought. But we now know that the text of this epigraph circulated on papyrus far beyond the place on the road between Baghdad and Hamadan where it was originally inscribed, and that memory of the text remained alive for many centuries after the fall of the empire. We also know that Aśoka was familiar with and adapted the phraseology of the royal Achaemenid texts for his own inscriptions, as well as undoubtedly

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[34] Tr. King and Thompson, ed. Lendering (cf., as of 1/03, http://www.livius.org/bebm/ behistun/behistun01.html#Introduction) and slightly modified here. See also the Persepolis platform inscription of Darius (DPeOP) available as of 1/03 at http://wwwoi. uchicago.edu/OI/PROJ/ARI/ARIIntro.html.

[35] The three selections are Rock Edicts III, II, and XIII (Hultzsch [1925]) and date from 257-56 BCE.

the imperial epigraphical habit itself.[36] These, the first ever to be produced in the Indian subcontinent, were incised on dressed rock faces or on 40-tonne polished granite pillars 15 meters in height over some thirty years beginning soon after his accession. Although we will find repeatedly elsewhere, as we do here in the case of Aśoka, that a conception and set of practices of how to be imperial were passed down in historical memory and imitated both through time and across space, not all components of this vision were realized everywhere in the same manner. There are fundamental differences in the culture-power complex that can be perceived through the Achaemenid and Maurya inscriptions, differences that seem to have been reproduced—though the links in the historical chain of reproduction seem sometimes beyond recovery—in the very divergent instantiations of the empire-form that were to follow in the western Mediterranean and South Asia. My brutally brief review of these differences will be organized according to the categories noted earlier: language, territoriality, governance, and the ethno-transcendent.

With respect to language in general and literary culture in particular—the preeminent medium for the expression of the empire's essence, or so we may be prone to think of it—the empire-form would acquire in its later avatars an entirely different complexion from what we find among the Achaemenids and the Mauryas. Darius like his successors evinced a decided linguistic pluralism by publishing his inscriptions in three versions, Old Persian, Akkadian, and Elamite. Old Persian itself appears at no time to have been promoted as an imperial language and no imperial literature of any kind, so far as we know, was produced in it. Instead, Aramaic, a language entirely unrelated to Old Persian, served as the language of state, though again without generating a courtly literature. In his edicts Aśoka showed himself to be similarly if less dramatically pluralistic by using relatively localized registers of Prakrit, that is, Middle Indic ("less dramatically" because Aśoka did not choose to employ Dravidian languages for those inscriptions he had installed in southern India). Like Old Persian and Aramaic, Prakrit in the third century BCE and

[36] On the circulation of Darius's inscription see Kuhrt (2001), 98; its preservation in memory into the Sasanian period is noted by Utas (2001); Benveniste (1964), 144-145 points out that the Prakrit phrase cited above from Aśoka is calqued on the Old Persian—in the same way that the Kuṣāṇa titulature of three centuries later, *mahārāja rājātirāja devaputra*, is calqued on the Iranian (Maricq [1958], 383, see also below n. 57).

for some centuries thereafter seems to have had few literary-cultural associations.[37] In neither instance does it seem that a literary heritage has been lost; it is likelier that none was ever produced in the first place. By contrast, in both Rome and post- Maurya India, the literary-cultural component of empire was to become central to its conceptual production and actual promulgation, and in each case a new imperial language was cultivated in such a way that its own emergent transregionality would complement and reproduce, though in entirely incommensurate ways, the transregionality of imperial power itself. But this is the one area of convergence in the two later empire-forms; in every other feature, they are radically different, and their difference can be seen, now clearly, now dimly, to be pregiven in their two archaic models.

One remarkable and consistent area of conceptual divergence in the post-axial world of Rome and India is the nature of the idea of the transregion itself: the absolute boundlessness of the one, the relative boundlessness of the other. In our two texts the same distinction can be noted: Darius—along with Alexander and other descendents in one particular lineage of imperial emulation[38]—sought paramountcy as far as paramountcy could be sought. Aśoka by contrast had a decidedly bounded view of space, a finite if large geopolitical frame of reference, beyond which the rule of other powers was acknowledged. Modes of governance provide a second point of difference. Thanks to what, comparatively speaking, is a remarkably rich archive of documents, we have a reasonably good idea of how Darius ruled. A fundamental component was the stationing of *satraps* (guardians of the realm) in the various lands subject to him. This imperial ruling class was made up almost exclusively of Persian aristocrats—we find a very tight link, or so Pierre Briant has described it, between political power and ethnicity. Moreover, they produced across the empire what has been termed an "administrative uniformity."[39] It is not in the least clear how the Mauryas ac-

[37] As relevant ethno-categories themselves required, the Middle-Indic scriptural texts of Buddhists and Jains are to be excluded from the category of expressive textualized language, or "literature"—what is called in Sanskrit *kāvya*—as are texts that exist solely in oral performance and not in written form.

[38] On Alexander as the "last of the Achaemenids" see Briant (mss.); also Fowden (1993), 20-21.

[39] Kuhrt (2001), 106, 114 (slightly softened 118-119). It was Pierre Briant who established the socio-political category of "ethno-classe dominante," especially (1988), reaffirmed in (1996), 364, and (mss.).

tually ruled, or what in fact "rule" really meant, and this is so not only for Aśoka's historically quite anomalous *dharma*-order. His inscriptions speak of governance beyond the core area by princes (*kumāra*) or "sons of the noble ones" (*āryaputra*), but this seems to have applied only to the four major provinces; we know little about the *mahāmātras*, or officials, who ruled beneath these viceroys. The inability of students of South Asian polity to describe with confidence how imperial power really worked (on which more below) may be a consequence, not only of the stunning dearth of good historical data, but of an incommensurability between this kind of power formation and what is known from other times and places. At all events, it seems improbable that the Maurya political order was, like the Achaemenid, an early form of the ethnically restricted and bureaucratically homogeneous patrimonial state.

A last area of divergence is the place in the imperial project of the ethno-transcendent. Here and in his other inscriptions Darius not only celebrates his lineage but also communicates an unmistakable conception of peoplehood: "That is why we are called Achaemenians" is not only a genealogical claim but an ethnic one. "Protect this Persian people," he proclaims on the Persepolis platform. "If the Persian people shall be protected, thereafter for the longest while happiness unbroken . . . will by Ahura come down upon this royal house." If later Indian rulers assiduously gave voice to their lineage pride—unlike Aśoka, whose utter silence about his ancestry is not only completely exceptional but also perhaps declarative of his new birth in the Buddhist order—they will continue Aśoka's indifference to, or better said, his incomprehension of, ethnicity, at least so far as ethnicity might figure as an element in political discourse. It is unclear whether the Maurya emperor even had a religious plan to spread the *dhamma*—scholars increasingly stress the ideological over the religious let alone sectarian nature of this category in the Aśokan inscriptions (it is effortlessly translated by *eusebeia*, "piety," or even social "deference," in the Greek versions of the edicts). But even if he did, he certainly evinces no sense of divine guidance in doing so. Entirely different is the Achaemenid, whose vast kingdom, polytheistic though it may have been, came to him by the grace of the once narrowly tribal and now universally transcendent deity, Ahuramazda, the "Wise Lord."[40]

[40] Briant (1986). A targeted study of the interaction of political and theological

In all three of these areas—space, rule, and ethnicized-transcendentalized authority—powerful continuities of difference will mark the two historically consequential successor empires that came into being in the eastern and western zones of Eurasia during the several centuries around the beginning of the Common Era.

Components of the post-Axial Empire-Forms: Language and Literature

We may again begin with two core texts that set forth the paradigms of the post-Axial empire-form in South Asia and Europe. The first is a selection from the Allahabad Pillar Inscription, a *praśasti*, or praise-poem (here supplemented with the introduction, or "letterhead," of the copperplate grants) of Samudragupta, second king of the imperial Gupta dynasty (its dates are c. 320-550; his own, c. 339-380):

> Om. Hail . . . The prosperous Samudragupta, the great king of kings (*mahārājādhirāja*), and ardent devotee of Bhagavān (*paramabhāgavata*); who is exterminator of all kings; who has no adversary equal to him on earth; whose fame is tasted by the waters of the four oceans; who is equal to [the gods] Dhanada [Kubera, guardian of the north], Varuṇa [guardian of the west], Indra [guardian of the east], and Antaka [Yama, guardian of the south] . . . who is the great-grandson of Gupta, the great lord; the grandson of Candragupta, the great lord; the son of Candragupta, the great king of kings . . . [Allahabad] 19 ff. [Samudragupta's] true magnificence combined with valor is illustrated by his first capturing and thereafter graciously releasing all the kings of the Southern Way (*dakṣiṇāpatha*): Mahendra of Kosala, Vyāghrarāja of Mahākāntāra, Maṇṭarāja of Kurāḷa, Mahendragiri of Piṣṭapura, Svāmidatta of Koṭṭura, Damana of Eraṇḍapalla, Viṣṇugopa of Kāñcī, Nīlarāja of Avamukta, Hastivarman of Veṅgī, Ugrasena of Pālakka, Kubera of Devarāṣṭra, and Dhanañjaya of Kusthalapuram . . . He exterminated many kings of Āryāvarta . . . [and reduced to tributary status] the frontier rulers (*pratyantanṛpati*), such as the lords of Samantaṭa, Ḍavāka, Kāmarūpa, Nepāla, and Kartṛpura, as well as the Mālavas, Ārjuneyas, Yaudheyas, Mādrakas, Ābhīras, Prārjunas, Sanakānīkas, Kākas, Kharaparikas, and others [He was mollified] by various acts—the paying of homage, the offer of their daughters

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discourses in Darius is offered by Lincoln (1996), and is expanded upon in work in progress. The nonsectarian significations of *dhamma* are argued out at length in Mukherjee (2000); years ago I pointed to a convergence of Aśoka's *dhamma* and non-Buddhist political discourse (1986), 19-24.

> in marriage, and their petitioning for the right to rule their own districts and provinces—on the part of the Daivaputra-Śāhi-Śāhānuśāhi, the Śaka Muruṇḍas, and all the lords residing in the islands, the Siṃhala and others . . .
> 24 ff. He is without antagonist on earth . . . he has wiped away the fame of other kings with the soles of his feet. He is Puruṣa [the Primal Being], being the cause of the prosperity of the good and the destruction of the bad . . . his officers are always engaged in restoring their powers (*vibhava*) to the many kings conquered by the might of his arms . . . His title "king of poets" has been gained through his many poetic compositions from which other learned men draw sustenance . . . He is a human being (*mānuṣa*) only insofar as he performs the rites and conventions of the world (*lokasamayakriyā*)—he is a god whose residence is this world (*lokadhāman*) . . . This column is like an upraised arm of the earth pointing out [the way for] the fame of Samudragupta. For having pervaded the whole earth by the great success obtained from his conquest of all the earth, it now has acquired a graceful easy step for going hence to the abode of the [Indra,] Lord of the Thirty [Gods].[41]

The second text is the *Res gestae divi augusti* (The Achievements of the Divine Augustus), of the first emperor of the *imperium romanum* (its dates are 27 BCE-c. 425 CE; his own, 63 BCE-14 CE):

> 1. The achievements of the Divine Augustus by which he brought the world [lit., the circle of the lands] under the empire of the Roman people (*quibus orbem terrarum imperio populi Romani subiecit)* … 3. I undertook many civil and foreign wars by land and sea throughout the world, and as victor I spared the lives of all citizens who asked for mercy. When foreign peoples could safely be pardoned I preferred to preserve rather than to exterminate them . . . 26. I extended the territory of all those provinces of the Roman people on whose borders lay peoples not subject to our government . . . At my command and under my auspices two armies were led almost at the same time into Ethiopia and Arabia Felix; vast enemy forces of both peoples were cut down in battle and many towns captured. 27. I added Egypt to the empire of the Roman people. Greater Armenia I might have made a province after its king, Artaxes, had been killed, but I preferred, following the model set by our ancestors, to hand over that kingdom to Tigranes, son of King Artavasdes . . . 28. I founded colonies of soldiers in Africa, Sicily, Macedonia, both Spanish provinces, Achaea, Asia, Syria, Gallia Narbonensis and Pisidia . . . 30. The Pannonian peoples, whom the army of the Roman people never approached before

[41] Bhandarkar ed. (1970), 203 ff., and 228 (from the Nālanda copperplate). I use (though sometimes modify) Bhandarkar's translation, and follow his geographical identifications (13-31) discussed below.

> I was the leading citizen, were conquered . . . the Dacian peoples [were compelled] to submit to the commands of the Roman people . . . 32. The following kings sought refuge with me as suppliants: Tiridates, King of Parthia, and later Phraates, son of King Phraates; Artavasdes, King of the Medes; Artaxares, King of the Adiabeni; Dumnobellaunus and Tincommius, Kings of the Britons; Maelo, King of the Sugambri.. . .[42]

The Samudragupta inscription, composed probably around 375 CE, is engraved on an 11-meter-high column, originally planted on the banks of the Yamuna River near today's Allahabad. The column carries two Aśokan edicts, another in a host of examples of how rulers in South Asia affiliated themselves with the imperial charisma of their predecessors by the most material of communicative practices. Perhaps a generation or two after Samudragupta the text of the Allahabad epigraph was adapted by the celebrated poet Kālidāsa in the fourth chapter of his mytho-political epic, *Raghuvaṃśa* (The Dynasty of Raghu): In this medium the inscription circulated across southern Asia as far as Khmer country and Java, where it helped to define for a millennium something of what it meant to be imperial.[43] Three centuries before Samudragupta, a few years after Augustus's death in 14 CE, his *Res gestae*, likely in conscious emulation of Persian practices,[44] was carved onto bronze tablets (now lost) set on pillars before his mausoleum on the Tiber in Rome, which for its part was meant as an imitation of the tomb of Alexander. Indeed, the monument could well have been seen by Indian ambassadors to Rome—their presence is noted in the testament itself—or by others who participated in the newly burgeoning direct trade between India and Rome.[45] The text was also reproduced in various temples dedicated to the Divine Augustus across the empire—at Ancyra, Apollonia, Pergamon, Antioch, and very probably elsewhere.

What is first and foremost striking about these two documents—

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[42] Tr. Brunt and Moore (1967), 19 ff. A good analysis is provided in Nicolet (1991), 15 ff., especially 20.

[43] See for example Barth (1885), 13, vss. 6 and 7 (= *Raghuvaṃśa* 4.49 and 54, in both cases eliminating local Indian reference) concerning King Bhavavarman II in seventh-century Campā, or Sarkar (1971), 26, concerning King Sañjaya in eighth-century Java.

[44] Gagé cited in Nicolet (1991), 20 and 26 n. 15; Fowden (1993), 6 also comments on the Roman (and Sasanian) aspiration to imitate the Achaemenid achievement.

[45] *Res gestae* 31:" Embassies from kings in India were often sent to me, which had not been seen before that time by any Roman leader."

to a degree it is hard now to imagine, so far has the process of naturalization advanced—is the very languages in which they are written, Sanskrit in the one case, Latin in the other. I say "striking" because there was nothing at all predetermined about the fact that these were to become, not just languages of state but languages of empire—displacing, each in its own way, local or competitor languages—and to develop the kind of complex literary culture that would make it possible to achieve this status. In both instances, the earlier practices of the Achaemenids on the one hand and the Mauryas and their successors (Śuṅgas, Kuṣāṇas) on the other, were left far beyond.

I have written elsewhere about the slow development and peculiar career of what I have termed cosmopolitan Sanskrit, a code of poetry and polity used across the vast spaces of southern Asia for some fifteen centuries.[46] Here I will make only a few points by way of summary. Long a sacred code restricted to the domain of ritual practices and the associated knowledge-systems of *vaidika* society—itself a supralocal world already by the mid-first millennium BCE, with its members at home everywhere—Sanskrit was transformed into, or rather invented as, an imperial and courtly language only at the beginning of the Common Era. It was disseminated by a process that can nowhere be identified as the military-political project associated with Latin that I describe below. If this process is itself still obscure to scholars, there is nothing unclear about the speed with which the fashion for Sanskrit spread. In a couple of generations it displaced the various Prakrits, such as those used by Aśoka, that had monopolized the world of public inscription for some four to five centuries from the Maurya period on. The first large-scale Sanskrit epigraph with expressive intention was produced in 150 CE by a Śaka (Indo-Scythian) prince ruling in Gujarat; Samudragupta's pillar inscription two centuries later is only the *second* in existence (a fact not often registered), and there is no reason whatever to believe that much has been lost; Sanskrit was simply not used for this purpose before the early centuries CE. From that point on for a millennium and more, however, the idiom in which power spoke in South Asia would be Sanskrit and Sanskrit alone, never again Prakrit, nor yet the vernacular. The latter, *deśabhāṣās*, or "languages of Place" —by which

[46] Pollock (1996)

I refer to everything from Kannada, Tamil, and Bangla, to Javanese and Khmer—were not proscribed during the Sanskrit epoch, far from it. Most were first literized under the influence of Sanskrit and (in the south at least) often functioned importantly in Sanskrit inscriptions themselves as languages of record, used for noting the specific terms of the endowment or whatever the inscription registered. Sanskrit monopolized the *literary* function because this function was and long remained homologous with the political function: as a supraregional ideal the sphere of the political presupposed a supraregional code, and as the practice of power comprised to a significant degree an aesthetic dimension, power required an instrument capable of aestheticization. When new geocultural limits of power came to be recognized in India (as they came to be recognized in western Europe) over the course of the vernacular epoch that began in the early second millennium, the languages of Place would take on this aesthetic function themselves, long and well tutored as they had been by Sanskrit.

The slow development of Latin over the course of many centuries, from a local idiom spoken in the lower Tiber Valley into a vastly supraregional language, confronts us with what one scholar has called "one of the surprises of history."[47] Latin's ennoblement took place in intimate and unambiguous dependence on a military-political project, first that of the Republic, later that of the Principate. Wherever Roman arms and Roman law traveled, Latin traveled, too, and in the process almost completely silenced all other linguistic codes. By the end of the first century BCE all languages of Italy other than Latin (Oscan, Umbrian, Etruscan) had disappeared from the inscriptional record; they had no continuing documentary let alone literary existence. A similar fate awaited regional languages elsewhere in the Roman world: those of Iberia and Gaul, of North Africa (Punic, Phoenician, Libyan), and most of those of the Roman Near East. All these languages may have retained an oral vitality for some centuries after conquest, but they participated (or were allowed to participate) in no way in literary culture and would all die out. An "absolute domination" of Latin in the West, Arnaldo Momigliano called it (Greek of course retained its position of prominence in the east); and he goes on to remind us that if Syrians, Egyptians, and

[47] Hammond (1976), 39.

Armenians saved their languages (and perhaps their souls), it was thanks in part to Christianity.[48]

We are probably right to hesitate before drawing too critical a conclusion from the epigraphical and literary record. Yet there is no doubt that the expansion of the cultural borders of Latinity was viewed in history, and viewed consequentially, as closely linked with the expansion of the political borders of Latium. To many vernacular literati of the high Renaissance, the historical model of cultural politics they found in Rome was one they strove to apply in the crystallizing nation-states. And they found confirmation of this already in Augustine, for whom Rome "imposed its language upon the subject peoples at the same time as it imposed its political yoke."[49] To be sure, these are expressions of minds from entirely different thought-worlds, and almost certainly mistakenly viewed as policy what was far more likely indifference on the part of the rulers coupled with opportunism on the part of the ruled. But the fact remains that the expansion of Latin was accompanied by a stunning eradication of language diversity.

We may not have any very strong models for the adoption of Sanskrit literary culture across the space of the Sanskrit cosmopolitan order, but what we can gather from its history suggests how little it has in common with the parallel process of Romanization. Nowhere did the conqueror's prestige provide the catalyst for cultural change, for the simple reason that nowhere in the expansion of the Sanskrit cultural order can we point to conquest. There was no bureaucratic incentive to adopt Sanskrit, as there often was to adopt Latin given the place of Roman law in the administration of the provinces; law in the Sanskrit cosmopolis appears to have remained resolutely local (there is no evidence that *dharmaśāstra*, whatever its true relationship with positive "law," was ever cultivated in Southeast Asia). Nor was there anything comparable to the influence exerted by a core culture in a center-periphery world system relationship. There existed in the Sanskrit cosmopolis only a conceptual and not an actual center, one that could and would be replicated in many different places, as the history of toponymic duplication

[48] Momigliano (1987), 142, 158.

[49] See for example Claude de Seysell cited in Derrida (1984), 98; Augustine (*De civitate dei*, XIX 7) cited in Dagron (1969), 24.

across southern Asia shows: every region seems to have had its own Ganges (see further on this below).

In other respects, however, the imperial careers of Sanskrit and Latin have many traits in common. They show above all that in the cultural repertory of the post-Axial empire-form an increasingly important component was a language of transregional stature, one that, in its very communicative capacities, was capable of embodying and transmitting transregional political aspiration. The most central—and, for the new empires, innovative—of all these communicative capacities was the development of that expressive textuality we now typically call "literature." In the Latin case, this was the result of sudden and conscious invention around 240 BCE. Some three centuries of historical Roman existence prior to this left no trace of "artistic composition" and the merest scraps of text evincing "linguistic satisfaction and emphatic solemnity." Evidence for such textuality prior to 240 is so meager as to suggest a purely "practical culture."[50] Latin literature begins, no doubt in one sense of "beginning," by the application to expressive language of writing, which before mid-third century BCE was rare; but also by appropriations from the Greek, the superposed literary culture, with which for the first three or four centuries of its career Latin existed in a relationship of pronounced inequality (versions of the *Res gestae* itself in the eastern empire are bilingual). The first writer in Latin, Livius Andronicus, a freed Greek slave from southeast Italy, produced a translation from Homer's *Odyssey* and adapted Hellenic drama, creating in the process a specifically poetic language that would influence later Latin poetry. Cogent scholarly argument relates the invention of Latin literature to the First Punic War (264-41), Rome's growing hegemony in the western Mediterranean, and its evolving imperial self-understanding. More important, it has ethno-historical support: the connection was one the Romans themselves later made.[51] The specific relationship between culture and power in evidence in this genealogy manifests itself with ever greater clarity in subsequent literary history, not just in the work of Naevius and Ennius, the immediate successors to Livius, but above all in Vergil.

With respect to Sanskrit, no expressive textuality, according to

[50] Kenney and Clausen (1982), 53-58 (from whom I quote).

[51] For the positivist history, see Rawson (1989), 429; for the ethnohistorical account, see Gellius 17.21.42 (cited Gruen [1990], 82, n. 10).

ethno-categories, existed in Sanskrit before this period, and a radical break in the history of culture was effected by the invention of what came to be called *kāvya* (for which "poetry" or better "literature" is a reasonable translation).[52] The circumstances under which this invention occurred—or under which processes already under way were consolidated—must have been shaped by a number of factors: one, of a technological order, was the invention of writing, almost certainly at Aśoka's court in the middle of the third century BCE (around the time written Latin first becomes common); another, of a social order, was the coming of new aspirants for power from Iran and Central Asia, such as the Śakas, who appear to have understood better than anyone before them the courtly possibilities available in the aesthetic resources of the Sanskrit language (as the Greek Livius, and the Oscans Naevius and Ennius may have done for Latin). Yet very few if any cases are to be found where literature was instrumentalized by power in the way that was foundational to Latin literature at its origin; this was certainly never the case with the Buddhist poets of the early centuries CE, nor yet of the great writers of courtly epic in the later centuries, who if they allegorized power did so almost too deftly to be made out. One additional parallel may however exist: Is the new deployment of a prestige language in written form for the creation of literature, which we find in Sanskrit and Latin at roughly the same epoch (about 200 BCE onward), a comparable reaction in the face of the same superposed cultural forms then manifesting themselves on the eastern and western frontiers of the Hellenic world? Whether India and Rome participated in the same system of literary-cultural circulation, however, must remain undecidable in the absence of new data. But whatever may be the brute facts of literary beginnings, Sanskrit cultural memory in South Asia acknowledged nothing superposed to Sanskrit either in its origins or in its later history.

The achievement of literariness in imperial language is important not only in itself but also because it could communicate and constitute key symbolic goods of the empire-form, among the most important being the fame of the overlord. This is something insistently expressed in Samudragupta's text, and it holds for Augustus as well, for the preservation and enhancement of renown were as cru-

[52] See Pollock (2003), 41 ff.

cial in Rome as in India. Closely related are two other components: the development of formal and rhetorical attributes, above all metrics and tropology, that regulated the production of beauty everywhere according to the same norms; and the cultivation of grammar and the dignity and stability it confers. Only in a code constrained by grammar and thereby escaping the danger of degeneration could those symbolic goods find enduring expression. Grammar was a relatively late intellectual enterprise in classical antiquity, never attaining the same epistemic centrality in Rome as in southern Asia; instead it was a consequence of, and always remained a component of, forensic rhetoric or the arts of public persuasion. Yet it became increasingly important in the Latin tradition as active competence in the language waned. As for the poets themselves, however, they had always cared deeply about language discipline—Latinitas was from the beginning a virtue of the writer—and as a result, a transregional normativity in grammar, metric, genre and the rest was widely cultivated. In the case of Sanskrit culture, by contrast, grammar was absolutely central from an early date, both as a cultural practice and as an epistemic paradigm.[53] And it was a key valence of kingly rule. It is in this spirit that Samudragupta, like virtually every ruler after him (and unlike most Roman rulers, who were patrons but rarely producers of literature), celebrates his achievement in literature and systematic thought (*kāvya* and *śāstra*), since the use of "just" or true language (*sādhuśabda*) was evidence of a man's being just (*sādhu*).

As a result of all this, both Sanskrit and Latin literature possess a uniformity that gives a clear stylistic embodiment to the imperial cultural order. For, without denying some local coloring, to participate in that order meant precisely to occlude difference of location in space, and indeed, difference of location in time. Claims to universal sovereignty would hardly be intelligible, practically or ideologically, if asserted in a language of a given locale. It is this very spatiotemporal reach through uniformity that often makes it difficult to localize or date a work of Sanskrit or Latin literature—which, by the argument advanced here, is precisely what constituted one of their greatest attractions to a conception of power and fame that sought—in their very different ways—to transcend both space and time.

[53] Compare Shulman (this volume).

With the transregional homogeneity of the communicative medium of the empire-form, however, the similarities between India and Rome end. In everything else we find ourselves confronting two entirely different modes of understanding and enacting the culture-power complex of empire.

Components of the post-Axial Empire-Forms: Territoriality

A key component in the creation of the empire-form, universally recognized in the scholarly literature and clearly manifest in all four texts presented above, is the projection of power transregionally. Yet clearly not all such projections are the same across this world, and the peculiar shape of the imperial transregion in South Asia—indeed, the very fact that it has a peculiar shape—points toward a crucial point of difference over against the western Asian, Roman, and indeed and importantly, the later European colonial form. The case about India requires more detailed exposition, since no good account exists. The Roman Empire, with its much richer tradition of scholarship, can be treated in summary fashion.

The conceptual geography of imperial power in South Asia grew slowly over time, only gradually achieving what was to be its paradigmatic form. An early sign of political or political-cultural transregionality, as much concrete as discursive—the distribution is often evidence of a space, not of concrete power, but of an *imaginaire* of power—is to be seen in the reference and distribution of the Aśokan edicts themselves.[54] In view of what is to come, this space is notable both for what it contains and what it excludes. Except for a dense concentration in Brahmagiri, Gavimath, and other locales in central Karnataka, most of the Aśokan inscriptions are found in the Maurya core area and, remarkably, in the far northwest, today's Peshawar (Shahbazgarhi) and Kandahar in southern Afghanistan (ancient Arachosia). This physical distribution is corroborated in the text of the inscriptions themselves: peninsular India is "beyond the borders" of Aśoka's domain, which however does include Greeks and Iranians in the northwest.

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[54] The question of the centralization of power in the Maurya Empire is considered in Fussman (1982). Most scholars believe central control weakened in direct proportion to distance from the metropolitan core. A good exposition on the idea of the *imaginaire* is offered in Collins (1998), 72 ff.

On the eve of the consolidation of the new Sanskrit political order, if we might so call it, two Prakrit inscriptions chart out a different kind of mega-space. The first, from the world of the Sātavāhanas (who ruled c. 225 BCE-250 CE), describes the territory of king Satakarṇi around 150 CE, basically comprising the entire region from the western Ghats (Malaya) to the eastern (Mahendra), and from Kathiawar south to the Kṛṣṇa river in Andhra (Ṛṣika).[55] The same area is more or less reproduced as a core region in the Hathigumpha cave inscription issued around the same time by King Khāravela of Kaliṅga, who describes how over the course of his reign he attacked the "western region" of Satakarni and neighboring areas including Ṛṣikanagara on the Kṛṣṇa.[56] But we are then told something more: Khāravela made an expedition across "Bharadhavasa"—that is, Bharatavarṣa, the "Clime of the Bharatas," one of the first appearances of the term for the transregion in Indian epigraphy—later bringing terror upon the "kings of the northern way" (*utarāpadha*) and the people of Magadha and Aṅga, and, in the south, upon the Pāṇḍya realm. Aside from some discontinuity in the representation of space, the two inscriptions offer the unmistakable impression of a slowly consolidating arena, and—what is more important in the present context—of the *finitude* of the arena within which political action was thought to make sense.

Within the span of two centuries, something significantly new in the conceptual space of power seems to manifest itself, and this is observable first in the Samudragupta inscription. The dominant concern of the record, overshadowing even the celebration of its aesthetic, is to establish the spatial realm to which Gupta power pertains. The impulse is of a piece with the Prakrit inscriptions, and indeed of the very first Sanskrit epigraph, that of the Śaka Rudradāman (150 CE), but Samudragupta's geopolitical vision is of an order of magnitude grander and more coherent. There are some uncertainties in the names of places and overlords, but many can be set in the real world. The "kings of the southern way" probably represent the overlords and allies of what was earlier the Ikṣvāku zone and the then ascendant Pallava domain. Kosala, Mahākāntāra, and so on have been taken to refer, sequentially along a southern cline, to places in today's Orissa, Andhra Pradesh, and Tamil Nadu. This

[55] *Epigraphia indica* 20, 72 ff.
[56] *Epigraphia indica* 8, 60 ff.

tour d'horizon of the southern region is followed by, first, Āryāvarta, the north-central zone; then, in a sort of counter-circumambulation of the four quarters, the north-eastern frontiers (*paryanta*) (Samataṭa and Ḍavāka referring to areas in today's Bangladesh, Kāmarūpa to western Assam, Kartṛpuram to the Katyur Valley in Almora district); the west and northwest (Malwa etc.); the far northwest (toward Kabul and the Oxus beyond) where there ruled the last remnants of the Kuṣānas, "Son of [a/the] god, king of kings"—let us note the idiom, ultimately of Achaemenid-Sasanian coinage, that was picked up by the Guptas, "great king of kings"[57] —and Surāṣṭra, with its remnants of the Śakas; and, lastly, the subcontinental islands, including Sri Lanka.

The exact correspondence of the place-names in this record with dots on a present-day map is not our principal concern, but rather the spatial morphology itself and its semiosis. What is being constituted here is a new representation about imperial sovereignty, one that is emphatically *quasi*-universal, seeking distant though not infinite projection within a geopolitical space that is bounded (there are both explicit and implicit "frontier" zones) and therefore intelligible. It can without contradiction be termed a universal conquest—a "conquest of all the earth," *sarvapṛthivīvijaya*, in the words of the inscription itself—because it exhausts the domain where the extension of a particular kind of political power has meaning.

The geobody that here achieves what will be more or less its final state in the imperial imagination and that will come to be reproduced in royal Sanskrit inscriptions from now until the end of the imperial period is of a very stable, and very particular, sort. Consider the following two, entirely typical, examples from later in the Sanskrit cosmopolitan era. The first is an inscriptional praise-poem from the time of Nārāyaṇapāla of the Pāla dynasty of Bengal (r. 875-93) written in honor of a Brahman family who had served for generations as royal advisers. The deeds of three of these men

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[57] See Maricq (1958), 375 ff., especially 383-6. Konow (1929), 163-165 (following Lüders) on the phrase *maharajasa rajatirajasa devaputrasa [xx]i[xx]rasa* (a Kharoṣṭhī inscription of Kaniṣka II), along with Pelliot (1923), 97 ff., leads one on a wild goose chase. There is no connection in this titulature or its analogues with the representation that divided world political power into four sectors (China ruled by the "son of heaven," India ruled by the "great king," Persia ruled by the "king of kings," and Scythia—or Rome, or Byzantium, or Turkistan—ruled by e.g., Kaisara, *[ka]i[sa]rasa*, Lüders' certainly false conjecture for [probably] *khuṣaṇasa)*.

(Garga, Darbhapāṇi, and Kedāramiśra) are celebrated as follows:

> Śakra [i.e., Indra, king of gods] is lord only of the eastern quarter, and even there the demons were able to defeat him. I made my master Dharma[pāla] king of all four quarters." So [the counselor Garga] thought, and laughed in derision at Bṛhaspati, counselor to the gods.
>
> It was thanks to [the counselor] Darbhapāṇi's political knowledge that King Devapāla could make all the world pay tribute, from the Father of Revā [Mount Vindya], whose high-piled rocks are moistened with the madder of elephants, to the Father of Gaurī [Mount Himālaya], whose whiteness is intensified by beams from the moon on Śiva's crest, and all the way to the two oceans, whose waters are reddened by the rising and setting of the sun.
>
> The lord of Gauḍa, having long paid homage to the wisdom of [the counselor Kedāramiśra], took possession of this footstool, the earth, with its tasseled border, the oceans, after annihilating the people of Utkal, humbling the Hūṇas, and humiliating the overlords of Drāviḍa and Gurjjara.[58]

It is evidently crucial that in each ruler's case the supraregion of his dominion be enunciated, whether by mythic reference (the king of men exceeds the king of gods in his universality), by geographical reference (which seems to naturalize the dominion), or by a more strictly political reference (again, the four peoples mark the four points on the relevant political horizon: the Hūṇas in the north, the people of Utkal in today's Orissa in the east, the Drāviḍa in Tamil country in the south and the Gurjjaras in the west). My second exemplar of the standardized imperial geobody comes from the court of the Gurjara-Pratīhāras dating to the second half of the ninth century that celebrates an earlier king of the dynasty, Nāgabhaṭa:

> Of [Vatsarāja] was born a son of great fame named Nāgabhaṭa—people said it was the Primal Being himself. Into his princely power fell, like so many moths, the kings of Andhra, Sindha, Vidarbha, and Kaliṅga . . . He labored for the good of all humanity, and from the time of his youth his transcendent power made itself manifest by forceful seizures of the forts of kings: those of Ānartta, Mālava, Kirāta, Turuṣka, Vatsa, Matsya, and others.[59]

Again, four points of a very specific compass function as the normative frame of reference for imperial power: Andhra in the south, Sindh in the west, Vidarbha in the north central, and Kalinga in

[58] *Epigraphia indica* 2, 160-167, vss 2, 5, 6.
[59] *Epigraphia indica* 18, 108, vss. 8, 11.

the east. These areas, by now virtually sheer placeholders, so to speak, for vast regional spaces, are given denser texture by the specific references to places in between: Ānartta in Gujarat, Matsya in present-day central Rajasthan, northeast of Jaipur; Mālava to the east in Madhya Pradesh, Turuṣka (country of the Turks) in the far north, Vatsa centered on the city of Kauśāmbi on the Yamunā, with the Kirātas standing for pastoral nomads everywhere in between. Real power, as conceptualized at this historical epoch, can be nothing less than this, but also nothing more. And if an explicit universalist political ethos accompanies this spatiality—everything that Nāgabhaṭa did, we are told, was for "the good of all humanity," *viśvajanīnavṛtteḥ*; the lineage to which he belonged, as another record has it, was "a place for refuge for the whole universe," *trailokyarakṣāspade*, and Nāgabhaṭa himself was Puruṣa, the Primal Being, like Samudragupta half a millennium before—it must be a universalism within and of a particular world.[60]

The inscriptional evidence can be supplemented by the representation of political space in a text devoted to political theory, the *Bārhaspatyasūtra*, that long enjoyed renown as a political handbook parallel and complementary to the *Arthaśāstra*, but probably to be dated almost a millennium later.[61] The third chapter describes the necessary attainments of rulership (personal, political, moral, religious), and then offers a detailed account of its essential geographical context:

> The earth is five million of leagues in extent. It contains seven continents (*dvīpa*) and is surrounded by seven oceans . . . In the middle is the Land of Action (*karmabhūmi*), and in the middle of this land is the Rose-Apple Tree of Mount Meru. To the north is Mount Himavān; to the south the land extends nine thousand leagues. In the south lies Bhāratakhaṇḍa (the Sector of the Bhāratas), and it is there that people's moral and immoral action manifestly bears fruit. It is there that political governance (*daṇḍanīti*) pertains, something to be studied by Indian people of all four social orders in the present and the future as it was in the past (*pūrvabhāratīyaiḥ paṭhitavyaḥ bhaviṣyair vartamānaiś ca cāturvarṇikaiś ca*). By this governance the blessed Sun became king, the Wind, and all the gods, and mortals, too . . . It is a thousand leagues

[60] Cf. vs. 6: "Vatsarāja, beloved of the whole world, which bowed down to him" *(natasakalajagatvatsalo vatsarājaḥ)*.

[61] Thomas placed the text "no earlier than the sixth or seventh century," without specifying an outer limit. Since it appears to refer to the Hoysalas its likely date is the twelfth or thirteenth century.

> from Badarikā [in the Himalayas] to the Bridge [to Sri Lanka]. It is seven hundred leagues from Dvārakā [in Gujarat] to Puruṣottamaśālagrāma [Puri in Orissa].[62]

There is a larger world beyond the cosmopolitan sphere, but it is largely unknown and has no relevance to the conceptualization of Bhāratakhaṇḍa. This forms a coherent space in itself, clearly conceived in its extent, more or less homogeneous in terms of ethical valence: it is, uniquely and as a whole, the place of moral action (a *topos* as old as the oldest connected description of the sphere in the fourth- or fifth-century puranic accounts). More important, it is the object of a coherent mode of governance, *daṇḍanīti*, the politics of legitimate force. Governance itself in the Sanskrit thought-world has a spatial location, and though it may have a cosmic dimension—it is, after all, what enables the gods themselves to govern—its terrestrial location is in Bhāratakhaṇḍa and there alone.

Thus, if repeatedly in all this material reference is made to universality; if this becomes, as it everywhere does, *diganta rājya*, "power to the ends of the four quarters of space," this is no infinite universe, these are not horizons without limit. It is rather a bounded universality—the first apparent antinomy among several with which this world confronts us. A second is that multiple quasi-universal powers of this sort could exist simultaneously: the same claim Nāgabhaṭa was making could be made, and at the same time, by numerous other dynasties. Another is that multiple Indias existed: Every region had its own Ganges, and often Mount Meru (as in Java) and Kurukṣetra (as in Khmer country)—indeed, this seems to have been the geo-logic that permitted such quasi-universal polities to exist concurrently in the first place. Such polities and Indias were not mutually exclusive, nor was the fact of their co-presence illogical or unreal—it was simply a different logic and reality, of the sort that permitted the existence of a cosmopolis whose center was everywhere and periphery nowhere.

Much less needs to be said about the conception of political space in the Roman empire, given the extensive scholarship on the subject. But that it is something completely different from what we have just seen emerges as powerfully as anywhere from Augustus's *Res gestae*. The first thing to notice about Augustus's imperial geography

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[62] Ed. Thomas (1921), *3.64-133*. On the textual history of the geography of Bhāratavarṣa, see Kirfel (1931).

is its immensity: the "circle of the lands," in other words, the whole of the known inhabited earth, had been "subjected to the *imperium* of the Roman people." And indeed, the list of conquered or (supposedly) subject peoples is stunning: the *orbis* extends from Britain to Romania to Syria and beyond to Parthia, and from Arabia to Libya to Spain and France. Indeed, it is really the whole of the ancient *oikoumene*, with the borders that were thought to contain it: the ocean to the west, the coast of Germany to the north, Arabia and Ethiopia to the south, and India to the east. All had been subjected by force or had demonstrated their submission by sending ambassadors or concluding treaties—at least according to Augustus's representation. Obviously this was not the case with some, such as the Parthians and the Britons, but the reality of the fact is much less important for our purposes here than the reality of the fiction. This is empire whose logic, according to ethno-representation, is infinite extension for the sheer reason, it would appear, that extension can be infinite. Like the image that presents itself in the Darius inscription, or indeed, in the imperial project of Alexander the Great, there seems to be no deeper cultural logic at work that links the lands to be conquered beyond the fact that they exhaust the known world. This is truly an arena for political action that is without any limit, cultural, ecological, or other kind. The Romans in their own eyes had become, as Cicero put it, "the true masters of all the peoples and all nations on land and on sea."[63]

Not only was there no place for the replication of places in the Roman empire—there is no toponymic duplication until Roma nova (and note, it is not the *same* Rome but a *new* one) was created by Constantine in 330—there was no place for a centerless world. The entire world is reduced to the city of Rome.

How these conceptual spaces construed with the actual exercise of power is the next question in comparative empire, and one that, for South Asia, is far more difficult to answer with any kind of certainty.

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[63] The *oikoumene* is discussed in Nicolet (1991), 21-22. *Orbis terrarum* means the whole of the habitable world (though other uninhabitable domains were known), and as Nicolet demonstrates, the Romans claimed world domination at least several generations before Augustus. He cites Cicero on 36. Brunt argues that "There was no point at which such expansion could halt, so long as any independent people remained" ([1972], 170).

Components of the post-Axial Empire-Forms: Governance

Everywhere we look across the world of Sanskrit text-production we find reiterated the limited political transregionality described above, one that was almost completely settled in its spatial contours by the middle of the first millennium and that remained the ultimate horizon of political aspiration for centuries. There is no doubt about the structure, stability, ubiquity, and cultural-political content of this transregionality. What is in doubt is its relationship to other kinds of more pragmatic reality.

The response of modern scholars to the kinds of pronouncements we encounter in Sanskrit inscriptional discourse has almost consistently been to impugn their veracity on the grounds of factuality. "More epic than historical," writes the editor of a twelfth-century imperial inscription, expressing a widespread, even common-sense view—one with a long history, in fact. When visiting India in the eleventh century Alberuni wrote in reference to the Kashmiri king Muktāpīḍa that "According to their account he ruled over the whole world. But this is exactly what they say of most of their kings. However, they are incautious enough to assign to him a time not much anterior to our own time, which leads to their lie being found out."[64] It is no doubt true that the quantity of reality effects found in Samudragupta's pillar inscription—the insistent specification of persons and places—is much diminished in later records and that the entire discourse takes on the vagueness and flatness of a literary *topos*. Yet the dichotomy between "epic" and "historical"—between a putatively concrete reality of political fact and an airy unreality of political fiction—is simplistic and empties the political discourse of transregionality of all significance whatever, leading many scholars to characterize old India as "prepolitical." We foreclose rather than expand the possibilities of interpretation by denying that fictions are themselves social facts, that ideals are actually existing values, that imagination is information. And we thereby exclude the possibility that the geomorphology of political aspiration of the sort described above—one moreover that is insistently promulgated in the Sanskrit epic *Mahābhārata*, which itself was insistently promul-

[64] *Indica* (tr. Sachau), vol. 2, 178. The editor cited is L. D. Barnett (*Epigraphia indica* 15, 86 n.).

gated by rulers across South Asia through temple endowments for public recitation—may have exerted existential force not just on medieval thinkers and writers, but indeed on rulers, too.

To be sure, recognizing that representation has an important element of reality to it, an element of the desirable if not the possible, does not free us of the obligation to inquire into the nature of the power that filled imperial space, to ask to what degree conceptual and actual spaces of power did or did not converge. But posing this question brings us to one of the thorniest problems of premodern Indian history, the structure and character of the imperial polity. It is intractable on every front, in terms of categories, evidence, interpretation.

Earlier attention was drawn to the problem of finding ways to think about political forms of the non-West outside of the presuppositions engendered by Western models.[65] Added to and reinforcing this categorical obstacle is an empirical one, deriving from the kinds of evidence we possess for making sense of early Indian empires. The primary reference point for any discussion of empire in first-millennium India is the Gupta formation. But consider the data we actually possess from the imperial Guptas themselves: The extant records issued by the dynasty, including seals, consist of perhaps twenty fragmentary documents, totaling hardly more than 250 lines of printed text. If we add all the documents produced by their subordinates, we can double the number of each, and if we include some newly published copperplate texts, another 300 lines. Roughly a thousand lines of text all told from a period of two and a half centuries constitute the sum total of the direct textual basis of our knowledge of the Gupta empire—thin gruel indeed, even if this calculation is off by a factor of two or three or five. And this is entirely typical of imperial polities of South Asia.[66]

Students of early Indian political history have long wondered whether real bureaucratic centralization existed, or only ritual he-

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[65] More difficulties of a local sort confront us in dealing with Gupta India in particular, given its place in the nationalist imagination of postcolonial India. The ideological constraints (nationalist, communalist, etc.) on writing the history of the Gupta empire are discussed in Lorenzen (1992).

[66] Even with respect to Vijayanagara (c. 1340-1565), the last great imperial formation to unify most of premodern southern India, the character of the evidence available leaves it uncertain what it means to speak of "unification." See Sinopoli and Morrison (1995).

gemony in a virtual state; real conquest and domination, or more ceremonialized forms of incorporation and subordination. The data do not allow us to answer these questions. But we can still try to draw some kind of general picture of the political sphere in South Asia during the imperial epoch

While local forms of dominion must have varied widely, the favored mode of organizing, or aspiring to organize, political power in terms of space was large-scale and transregional. For among all the dynasties from the Mauryas, the Kuṣāṇa-Śaka (c. 50 BCE-300 CE), the Sātavāhanas, the Guptas and their various successor political formations in the north—the realm of Harṣa of Kanauj, 606-47, the Gurjara-Pratīhāras (c. 725-950), the Pālas, c.750-1200—we seem everywhere to perceive big agrarian polities limited in number. These were "military-fiscal" formations, where the exaction of tribute from local overlords—who as a matter of *dharma*-ideology were left to rule in subordination to the emperor who defeated them—and the gathering of taxes from large populations, the command of military resources, or the acquisition of women in matrimonial alliances could be and were exercised over vast, "multilinguistic," "multiethnic" populations.[67] Political ceremonies such as the archaic Horse Sacrifice famously celebrated in the book 15 of the *Mahābhārata*, and which historical kings professed to have performed (kings like Dhanadeva of the Śuṅga dynasty or Pulakeśin I of the Cāḷukya, among countless others), asserted transregional claims of power. The building or repair of temples, or the planting of victory pillars and other inscribed monuments far beyond the imperial core were meant to project an expansive territoriality. The fashion for many of these key elements of the Indian empire-form was set already by Samudragupta: "He has favored all the kings of the south by releasing them after capture [to rule their own domains in subservience to him] . . . The border rulers he has made to gratify his awesome governance by paying all tribute, doing his bidding, coming before him to make obeisance . . . He has restored many kingly lines and kingships that have fallen [due to his power] . . [The Kuṣāṇas, Śakas, and all island lords] have been made to serve him by various acts: presenting themselves to him, giving their daughters as gifts to him,

[67] The scare-quotes flag the fact that discursively unified languages and memorialized group solidarities—necessary for "-lingual" and "-ethnic" to be conceptualized as "multi-"—did not yet exist in South Asia.

requesting to be able to rule their own domains by under the sign of the Garuḍa seal" (lines 20-4).

Beyond this it is not easy to say much. But it can hardly be doubted that little in the way of governance here bears comparison with the practices of power in the Roman Empire. This is a vastly different world so far as we can take its measure against the imperfect image of the southern Asian empire-form—though indeed, that of the Roman Empire is hazy too. For however archetypal, it remains a structure of governance very much in the eye of the scholarly beholder. Francophone scholars (unsurprisingly) find a far more standardized and "bureaucratic" structure than Anglo-Saxon scholars, who (unsurprisingly) stress the limited aims of the empire, such as peace-keeping and (or rather, in the service of) taxation, and see a more passive and very much undermanned structure of governance.[68] It is clearly hazardous to take sides here, but to the observer looking from the vantage point of Gupta South Asia the Roman empire does appear to have striven for and achieved a degree of centralization and strong rule without the remotest parallel in South Asia. Its bureaucrats and military apparatus, spread over a vast territory, exercised control over everything from garrisons to (according to some scholars) the standardization of legal forms, currency, weights and measures. To impose its will the Roman state employed some degree of coercion, taxation and the enumeration of its subjects for purposes of taxation (six million were counted in 48 CE), legal machinery, and, on occasion, techniques of Romanization, uneven but real, in cultural and political behavior, with selective award of the prized status of citizen to incorporate elites from the periphery.

The Roman imperial order was not about expanding the center to the periphery, as so often occurred in the symbolic political practices of southern Asia, but about incorporating the periphery into the single Roman center. It is hard not to see some similarities between Augustus and Samudragupta in their catalogue of the conquered displayed in public inscription, and to hear certain harmonies, uncanny however faint, of political accommodation ("the model set by our ancestors, to hand over" a conquered kingdom to the son of the defeated, as Augustus has it, seems echoed in the claim, by Samudragupta, of "first capturing and thereafter graciously releas-

[68] Contrast Nicolet (1991), 130 ff. on the census, and Lendon (1997), 2 ff.

ing" kings, "restoring their powers to the many kings conquered by the might of his arms"). Yet the very idiom in the *Res gestae* of "subjecting the world to the power" of one people is nowhere attested in the Sanskrit cosmopolis, and never do we hear—with the possible exception of Aśoka's confession of guilt for his Kalinga campaign—a declaration like the one Augustus made elsewhere in the same testament: "When foreign peoples could safely be pardoned I have preferred to preserve rather than to exterminate them" (3.2)—words written, as one scholar put it, to make known to foreign peoples Rome's "powers of collective life and death."[69]

No imperial formation arising in the Sanskrit cosmopolis ever established garrisons of their troops to rule over conquered territories. No populations were ever enumerated. No uniform code of law was in force anywhere across caste groupings, let alone everywhere in an imperial polity. We cannot point with any confidence to evidence that transculturation was the route to imperial service in the bureaucracy or military, rather than, say, an aesthetic choice (something quite different even if made within a field of political power). What we seem to confront here are modes of rule belonging to two entirely different conceptual universes. And this is the same impression we get from examining their political theologies.

Components of the Post-Axial Empire-Forms: Ethno-Transcendence

There are two aspects of transcendence that I want very briefly to examine in India and Rome: the nature of the *numen* of the ruler, and the place of deity in the self-understanding of imperial rule.

In his inscriptions Aśoka showed no interest in claiming transcendent status or indeed, even in commemorating his genealogy. Moreover, deity plays no role whatever in his conception of imperial rule, an absence by no means a necessary correlate of his Buddhism, which always tolerated local cults. Some sense of how far Indian political theology changed in the post-Axial period may be gained from contrasting the Samudragupta inscription. In his copperplate letterhead the ruler is celebrated as a "supreme devotee of Bhagavān." Bhagavān is the name of a deity whose origins in pastoral cults of the Midlands (the region of Mathurā) had by the fourth century long since

[69] See Veyne (1989), 348–350, 353–354.

been effaced, and who had been assimilated to a form of the polymorphic sustaining deity Viṣṇu. Besides worshiping the great god, the emperor is said to be "equal" to the four guardians of the quarters—no mere rhetoric here, since it was long a tenet of Indian political theology that the king in his very being was an amalgam of "shares" of the divine powers. More than this, Samudragupta is equated with Puruṣa, the "Primal Being," an entity that by this date had lost most of its Vedic associations as the *prima materia* of the cosmogonic sacrifice, and come to loosely refer again to Viṣṇu. On the one hand, the king is claimed (only) to equal this being functionally, "because of the prosperity of the good and the destruction of the bad" that he produces; on the other, his very status as a man is discounted: "He is a human being only insofar as he performs the rites and conventions of the world—he is [in fact] a god whose residence is this world."

There seems to be a certain conflation here of political-theological positions and views. It is not to our purpose to sort these out here, but three points can be made with reasonable certainty. First, the Indian king was widely viewed as what I once termed a "consubstantial godman," an ontological peculiarity that, if in no way unique to the world of early South Asia, was central to it. That said, the king was not the object of the kind of worship offered to deity. Although their icons (*mūrti*) might be displayed in temples—as early as those of the Pallavas in the Vaikuṇṭhaperumal Temple in seventh-century Kāñcīpuram and as late as those of Vāstupāla and Tejaspāla in the Lūṇavasahikā atop Mount Abu in the thirteenth century—kings were never the center of divine cults as such.[70] The king himself is a worshipper, and Samudragupta is entirely typical in celebrating himself as the "ultimate" devotee. Second, the supreme deity itself seems to me largely irrelevant as a source of royal authority. A talismanic presence or apotropaic force? Yes, without doubt, from Viṣṇu in the fourth-century Gupta world (their seal was marked with Garuḍa, the eagle of Viṣṇu) to Virūpākṣa in sixteenth-

[70] Or at least not until the seventeenth-century, if we accept a recent analysis of Nāyaka kingship, see Narayana Rao et al. (1992). I believe this statements holds true even for the *devarāja* cult instituted by Jayavarman II of the Khmers in the early ninth century; see Mabbett and Chandler (1995), 90 and Jacques (1994) ("divinities that were images of the king and kingdom it was their mission to protect," 8). I discuss the divine king in the Indian epic in Pollock (1991), 15-54.

century Vijayanagara. But a granter of heavenly mandate, justifier of rule, transcendent real-estate agent awarding parcels of land? Never, not for Aśoka, and not for anyone in South Asia who followed after. Last, and concomitantly, the king's transcendent god was never the god of a political *ethnie*—indeed, peoples were never geographicized-and-politicized. There existed no Guptan people, no Pataliputran people—the very idea will strike the Indologist as absurd and the terms rebarbative—but there was not in fact even a Kannadiga or Drāviḍa people that formed a community of common descent with shared memories and horizontal solidarities in the sense familiar to us from the ethnic history of Europe.[71] Many royal cities in India had their divine myths of foundation (as late as Vijayanagara, 1340), and virtually every dynasty claimed a divine origin. No one, however, ruler or people, claimed anywhere at any time that God chose them or gave them a land or provided them guidance or enabled them to conquer other peoples or lands.

Matters are, again, entirely different in Rome, where evidence of the divine guidance founding the *imperium romanum* is vast. "There are few Roman poets," as Momigliano noted, "who have not something to say on the providential nature of the Roman State." Indeed, it was in this that P. A. Brunt found what was most novel in the Roman attitude to their empire: "the belief that it was universal and willed by the gods." The expressions of poets and thinkers were no mere courtly flattery—there seems little reason to accept Momigliano's argument that no one really believed this idea given that no developed political theology ever emerged—but rather a constituent element of Roman thinking from the end of the third century BCE. When Cicero wrote that it was "by the will of the gods that we have overcome all peoples and nations," he was expressing an idea long and widely resonant in the minds of Romans—and one that would have been entirely unintelligible to his contemporary political thinkers in India.[72]

The providential nature of the empire was no simple heavenly mandate, however. It was something actually embodied in a divine emperor himself. The temples in which copies of Augustus' *Res gestae* were placed throughout the empire were dedicated to his wor-

[71] The place of ethnification in Jasper's theory of the Axial Age is noted at the beginning of this essay.

[72] Momigliano (1987), 144; Brunt (1978), 162 and 165.

ship (the *augusteion*), and cities competed keenly for the honor to build them (though of course nothing of the evangelism is found of the sort that would characterize the Christian empires that succeeded Rome). Historians who address the important if vexed question of the cult of the emperor speak typically of a Roman strategy of deploying the emperor's divinity and the imperial cult—the subject of annual celebration "in every city and province and army camp of the empire"—for the purposes of legitimation of the political order and the consolidation and pacification of the populace.[73] Such notions as "strategic deployment" or "political legitimation" may be entirely apposite in the Roman context. For understanding the thought-worlds of premodern southern Asia, however, I have serious doubts that the categories make any sense at all, universalizing Weberian presuppositions notwithstanding.[74]

One final and in some ways the most telling difference between these two empire-forms lies is the ethnicization, if that is the right word, of the *populus romanus* and its construction as a unitary political subject. (That the grounds of inclusion in Roman citizenship widened during the Principate is important but beside the point here.) Such ethnicization seems to be in evidence first in the early Republican period, after hegemony was attained in the western Mediterranean with the defeat of Carthage; the formula (in inverted form) *populus senatusque romanus*, for example, is attested first in 189 BCE. This sort of collective political subject is unknown in South Asia, as, a fortiori, was the will-to-power that it embodies. And the kind of sentiment describing this subject, found so often in Latin literature—for example, at the start of Cornelius Nepos's *Life of Hannibal* (c. 50 BCE): "No one doubts that the Roman people (*populus*) are superior in virtue to all peoples (*gentes*) . . . that they take precedence over all peoples (*nationes*) in courage"—was rarely if ever enunciated of any political collectivity in premodern South Asia.[75]

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[73] On the imperial cult see Sherwin-White (1973), 402-408; the quote is from Woolf (2001), 321. See also Lendon (1997), 168-172 and the mammoth study of Fishwick (1987-2002).

[74] First thoughts on a critique of legitimation as the universal solvent of political theory are offered in Pollock 1996.

[75] On the formula, see Klein, ed. (1966), 105. Nepos's *Hannibal* begins: *Si verum est, quod nemo dubitat, ut populus Romanus omnes gentes virtute superarit, non est infitiandum Hannibalem tanto praestitisse ceteros imperatores prudentia, quanto populus Romanus antecedat fortitudine cunctas nationes*. For two recent collections on ethnicity and power in the Roman world see Webster and Cooper (1996) and Mitchell and Greatrex (2000).

8. *Conclusions*

It is an arresting, if actually a curious, fact that a new way of organizing political power should have been invented in southern Eurasia in the course of the first millennium BCE. The rise of a form of polity that seeks to gather in its embrace not just the *populus* or the *demos* or the *janapada* (the "people-place" of early India) but vast transregional space is hardly self-explanatory. The continual reproduction of this form across world-regions is striking, and suggests that the problem of the political should occupy a more central place in axial theory than it now does. The relative historical coherence of the empire-form does not, however, necessitate a single causal explanation, for if some regularities and patterns may be discerned they share no single logic, and are not amenable to subsumption under a single covering law, whether ideational (an axial breakthrough in spiritual consciousness, for example), or material (such as the control of nomadism). Not all are equally universalizing empires, and consequently they require no analogous universalist or transcendentalist ideas to provide their agents with a conceptual framework in order to produce similar political structures.

Another explanation might lie in political imitation informed by historical memory. One line of remembering how to be imperial connected the Maurya, Kuṣāṇa/Śaka, Gupta formations—with variations in accordance with local sensibilities—if not quite as transparently as another line, with its increasingly explicit conception of a *translatio imperii*, connected the Roman (which looked backward to Trojan grandeur, too), Carolingian, and Ottonian (or, yet another, the Hellenic and Byzantine), with both traditions of memory variously adopting formative elements from the Achaemenids.[76] People can take up venerable uni-forms, but fill them with very different bodies. This I think can be clearly perceived in the case of Rome and India, and it has been as important to me to capture what differentiates them (in terms of territoriality, governance, transcendence) as to figure out what unites them (imperial literary culture) if we are to understand what each was. Let me end by trying to summarize just how profound are the differences of the empire-form in these two cases. I want to do this again by way of two texts—this

[76] See also Duverger (1980), 21.

time literary texts, indeed, two "foundational fictions"—that offer the most concentrated expressions of their respective imperial thought-worlds.[77]

At the beginning of the *Aeneid* Vergil "sings of arms and the man," the flight from Troy to Italy, the origins of the Latin people (*genus latinum*), the high walls of Rome, and *imperium sine fine*, power without limit, universal empire. In the *Raghuvaṃśa* Kālidāsa bows down to the mother and father of the cosmos, who are "fused together like sound and sense," in order that he might more deeply understand sound and sense when he tells the story of quasi-universal kingship—*diganta rājya*, power to ends of the four quarters of space—and the dynasty of the mytho-poetic Raghus.[78] Two visions of imperial, or even cosmo-politan order are offered here, but differing profoundly. First, consider the character of the *polis* they project. The one is comprised of a particular people, whose historical origins are of fundamental concern to the narrative of the poem, who are clearly placed in time and space. The other is centered not on a particular people but on a lineage of a mythic status so inclusive that half the kings of India could and did claim descent from it (the *sūryavaṃśa*, or solar dynasty), while the place (Ayodhyā), if a real piece of land in eastern Uttar Pradesh, was also just as easily thought to be located in central Thailand (Ayutthaya), where kings traced their lineage, at least nominally, to the solar kings, especially Rāma.

Second, observe how different is the frame of reference of the *cosmos* held to be meaningful for human life: In the one case, it is the *urbs* of Rome as this was expanded to the *orbis* (*terrarum*)—as Ovid was to say, *romanae spatium est urbis et orbis idem*, "the space of the city of Rome is the space of the world." The expansion of this frame happened by the will of God: the divine proclamation is made explicit when Jupiter declares "I have granted empire without end" (1.279), and granted it to a fully ethnicized political community (*romanos, rerum dominos, gentemque togatam*, "Romans, masters of the world, the people of the toga" [1.282]). In the other, the frame is instead "all that moves with life"(*jagataḥ* [*pitarau vande*]), where the father and mother of the universe choose no one people for rule over others, and where, in historical fact, no ruler justified his rule by proclaiming an ethnic identity. Also perceptible are two markedly different con-

[77] The following elaborates on Pollock (2002), 28-29.

[78] See *Aeneid* 1.1 ff. and *Raghuvaṃśa* 1.1 ff..

ceptions of how literary culture was thought to function in relation to power. In the one case, it works as a verbal instrument for celebrating power: the *Aeneid* is clearly mapped against the imperial present, and the text is virtually addressed to Augustus. In the other, literature is a celebration of the power of the verbal instrument itself, and accordingly the historical present of the imperial Guptas peaks through the veil of allegory only on the rarest of occasions.

As these two texts make clear, imperial power in antiquity did not recapitulate a theology of transcendence everywhere in the same way. Transcendence and empire may certainly exhibit a direct causal connection in some places—among the Achaemenids, the Romans, and especially in what some have called the "confessional empires" of late antiquity—but not elsewhere. And "empire" may not be amenable to any reductive typology. In early South Asia *diganta rājya* is not, like *imperium sine fine*, about world conquest, the absence of geo-logical limit on power, or legitimating transcendence, but about something very different, the construction, not of "nation"—a concept that as normally understood has no conceptual foundation at this time and in this place—but of a political formation that must not be reduced to any pregiven form by some implicit, mechanical sociology. It was a formation where culture and power stand in a rather different relationship to each other, too, so that ideas like "strategic deployment" of royal cults and the "legitimation" of rule seems less pertinent. And perhaps, too, it is about the recognition that the world does not work the same way everywhere, and should not be made to.

A comparable measure of difference is visible in the regional worlds that superseded these imperial formations. An exercise in comparative vernacularization would show us that, while the new polities brought into being across much of Eurasia as a result of the breakup of the classical ecumenes may look formally similar, their political and cultural contents are radically different, as are the implications of their histories for political and social theory.[79] Yet a further comparative exercise in the early-modern empire form would show that—by a process of historical imitation comparable to what is widely visible in the account I have provided—Western European colonialism drew sustenance from the model of world conquest perfected in Rome, whereas visions of *diganta rājya*, in sixteenth-cen-

[79] See Pollock (1998), (1999).

tury Vijayanagara, for example, or among the Marathas in the seventeenth, were shaped by inherited limits that had their own specific logic.

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RETHINKING THE AXIAL AGE— THE CASE OF CHINESE CULTURE

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In this paper, I intend to consider not just the concept of "breakthrough" as a crucial step on the path of development to Chinese higher civilization, but also the problem of reaching a breakthrough. According to Jaspers' concept of the "Axial Age" an additional breakthrough should take place: the appearance of modernity. Therefore, I will discuss how the first axial breakthrough brought a more than two thousand year long process of change to fruition—something perhaps even more significant for the preparation for modernity's arrival than the breakthrough itself. In addition, I will incorporate Eisenstadt's conceptualization of "multiple modernities", which aims to recognize how the modernities of each Axial Age civilization may present distinctive features inherited from the prior Axial Age—features which act as "cultural genes."

Neolithic Origins

Let us consider the process of Chinese cultural development since the Neolithic Age. Contemporary China is a land of vast territory, and although there was no term to define "China" in the Neolithic Age, the land mass of East Asia bordered by the Mongolian deserts and the Himalayas cannot be divided into very many culturally distinct parts. Topographic divisions and barriers were less relevant to this region than to the Eastern Mediterranean and the Fertile Crescent. In China, even five to six thousand years ago, regional cultures were in contact with each other, and could interact with relative ease.

Leaving material culture aside for the moment, let us concentrate on the incipient stages in the development of religious faiths. Today's archaeological discoveries provide us with a good deal of new information, and allow us to paint a very new and different picture

of China's past. One particularly noticeable phenomenon is the coexistence of two different sets of faiths. One set, which I call "jade culture" is attested to by spectacular discoveries from the Hung-Shan culture in contemporary Manchuria and the Liang-Chu culture in the delta region of the Yangtze and Ch'ien-t'an rivers. Both groups of archaeological sites yield jade pieces of excellent quality that were used to serve the spirits of various natural forces in ceremonial centers located on manmade and high in the mountains. Although there were no residential settlements in these ceremonial centers, tombs of dignitaries, most likely priests and priestesses, were found.[1]

A separate set of faiths is related to what we call "ancestor worship." In the archaeological sites of the Western part of the Yellow Earth Plain, known as the Yang-Shao cultures, large cemeteries next to residential settlements were common. The deceased ancestors and their living descendants were spatially immediate. As the cemeteries were arranged according to kinship structures, archaeologists have been able to use these sites to reconstruct the ancient social system.

These two traditions—jade culture and ancestor worship—met each other and gave rise to a hybrid culture that contained elements of both. A large cluster of sites exist in the southeastern part of today's Shan-hsi, in which very large cemeteries of several thousand tombs are clustered into blocks. These blocks probably represent kinship groups. From such cemeteries, archaeologists have learnt much about the stratification of society. The most lavishly built and largest tombs contain ornate objects buried with the masters. The typologies of art found within, along with the motif of presentation of art pieces, tell a story of the admixture of the coastal jade cultures and the Yang-shao cultures. The sacred objects found at these sites include both those intended to serve deities and those for serving ancestors.[2] It seems to me that a convergence of the two traditions took place as early as four thousand years ago. The worship of divinities, on the one hand, would eventually lend its weight to the concept of the "Mandate of Heaven," an endowment of power to legitimize an authoritarian state. Ancestor worship, on the other hand, would serve as a foundational principle for organizing the population into kinship groups. The Chinese dialectic between state and society, there-

[1] Wen Wu (1999), 98ff., 168ff.
[2] Wen Wu (1999), 66ff.

fore, appears to me to have ideological roots as deep as the Neolithic Age.[3]

From Shang to Zhou

The mighty Shang kingdom flourished between the sixteenth to the eleventh centuries BCE in Northern China. It is the only great Chinese kingdom of that era that has been archaeologically corroborated. From epigraphical material such as oracle bones, inscriptions, and other archaeological remains, historians have been able to assemble elaborate reconstructions of Shang civilization. In this ancient culture, ancestor worship was heavily emphasized. Deities or natural forces did appear in the records of divinations, but their frequency and significance were vastly outweighed by services to ancestors. Given the archaeological data that exists, it is difficult to reconstruct moral values. It can, however, be demonstrated that the Shang people possessed a high degree of historical consciousness. They referred carefully to precedents and past cases to determine both the timing and form of rituals, and to make decisions regarding state affairs. The inscriptions carved in turtle shells contain far more than oracle divinations; they also contain detailed records of state affairs and the daily affairs of the royal household. Large storage pits have been found in the Anyang site of the Shang state.[4]

From these oracle description records, it is possible to propose a process through which the Neolithic antecedents of "ancestor worship" may have gradually absorbed the jade culture's tradition of worshipping deities who represented the forces of natural phenomenon. Such a process appears to reveal the ascent of the Shang ruling lineage group over other components of a political complex which eventually became the monarchical state of Shang. The consolidation of power led to the domination of the Shang royal clan. Other spiritual figures were either incorporated into the royal lineage as remote ancestors, relatives and kinsmen or were excluded from the list of the deities.

This evolution was by no means a linear process: there were shifts between two centrifugal and centripetal forces at different stages.

[3] Hsu (2002) and Su (1997).
[4] Chang (1980).

Thus, the lists of spirits the Shang served in various ceremonies and rituals, or to whom they addressed questions, changed from time to time. Tung Tso-ping, the pioneer of oracle inscription studies, who first took notes on such divisions, labeled two schools of diviners, the conservatives and the reformers, (or the old and the new school). The most crass distinction between these two schools of divination appeared during the reign of Wu Ting and his grandson Tsu Chia (in the thirteenth century BCE). In Wu Ting's time, the list of spirits served in various rituals and ceremonies is quite extensive. Ancestors as well as other deities were all worshipped. This changed during the reign of Tsu Chia, the legendary reformer; only the ancestors and their spouses in principal royal lineage were served in state rituals. I am reluctant to adopt Tung's labels and simply identify them as two different attitudes towards the spirits.

In the ways of recording, one can even detect two relatively different styles, each representing a distinct school of diviner-recorders who alternately dominated court divination. One school was distinguished by careful writing in neat shapes, with services arranged by such regular patterns that one may even surmise that they did not care what the actual answers to the divinations were. This school valued neatness and regularity. The other school of diviner-scribes wrote in a bold and free style. They asked questions diligently and waited patiently for answers. New names of the leaders and ancestors of different ethnic groups (perhaps neighbors of subordinates of the Shang) often appear in the lists of spirits who have been served. I often label the first group as "rationalists" and the second group "tolerant liberals" who did not exclusively worship their own ancestors.[5]

Putting these two patterns of behavior together, I venture to suggest that rational reasoning and free thought both existed in the era of the Shang Kingdom. Such a phenomenon probably indicates a beginning of cultural development and the rationality of reason. The Shang consciousness of changes and continuity in history, as testified to by their emphasis on historical precedents in addition to the above-mentioned features, point to their awareness of temporality—specifically, a temporality that is subject to human interpretation.

By the eleventh century BCE, the mighty Shang kingdom was

[5] Hsu (1990), 96-97 and 105-106.

conquered by a lesser state named Chou, originally part of the western territory of Shang. This great conquest was a traumatic experience for the culturally more advanced Shang people, especially the intellectual elite: the scribes, diviners and the archivists. Epigraphical materials on bronze inscriptions inform that these intellectuals, after surrendering to their new masters, the Chou, continued to serve in the court for generation upon generation. We may expect that such a traumatic experience would cause them to think back reflectively on the Shang mentality. Although the authorship of the "Book of Changes" has not yet been determined, its content certainly originated from divination records. Here, the concept of change is not simply a recognition of and respect for precedent, but also an articulation of causalities. According to the "Book of Changes", the individual human decision in the process of change is more important than the chain of causality.[6]

The concept of the "Mandate of Heaven" was explicitly claimed by the Chou leaders to justify their authority over the vast territory of the Shang in Northern China. Inherent in the concept is a moral judgment of heaven upon human behavior. In the early reigns of the Chou, evidence points to a major debate between Chou leaders concerning the bestowal of the Mandate. Was it bestowed upon the Chou people as a nation, or the individual ruler as a person?[7] It would appear that that the second opinion prevailed in the end, an outcome that deprived the Chou forever of the status of a "chosen people" (that of the Israelites). Individual rulers from that point on needed to worry constantly about their own behavior, lest the Mandate of Heaven be taken away from them. Early Chou documents contain repeated warnings by Chou leaders and elders that good moral performance (avoiding excessive drink, for example, and not womanizing too much) was essential to the maintenance of power. These documents often cited examples from the Shang as illustrations of the cost of failure.

The Chou feudal system was organized around kinship structure, with the children of the royal family being enfeoffed in vassal states. Their children, or lieutenants, had domains parceled out to them from the vassal states. Ruling authority and paternal authority co-

[6] That is to say, human agency is more important than fate—in contrast to the Delphic tradition. See Hsu and Linduff (1988).

[7] Shaughnessy (1993).

incided and became identical. In this way, the Chou went even further than the Shang in their reliance on kinship structures to form a feudal network. Ancestor worship and state ritual were closely linked together. As indicated above, the Mandate of Heaven was related to the worship of ancestors as well as deities of natural and supernatural forces, and it served as a binding force that consolidated society.[8] In the time of the Chou, such a practice seemed to be a further elaboration of what had appeared in an incipient form in the Neolithic Age. I therefore suggest that by the early part of the Chou period, perhaps by the tenth century BCE, three basic features were firmly established in Chinese culture. These were: the relationship between men as embodied in kinship structures, the relationship between men and the supernatural as embodied in the moral judgment of the Mandate of Heaven, and the continuity between generations, which we call causal temporality and tradition.

Let us elaborate a little further here. The kinship system of the Chou feudalism is a hierarchy of lineages with the principal line of the royal house being the dominant. The lineages of royal siblings were subordinate. These branches again dovetailed into subsidiary branches, each of which regarded such secondary and tertiary ones as the principal and the branches respectively. This hierarchy within the kinship groups formed an extensive tree-patterned network. Relationships between any two persons in this Chinese society have been defined accordingly since. Likewise, due to the recognition that kinship relationship was hereditary generation after generation, this network foundation naturally had a continuity from past to future generations. A continuity of time is regarded as crucial to hold the network together. Therefore, reverence toward tradition from parents, parents of parents, etc., in a long line of ancestors, is crystallized into "filial piety", emphasis is placed upon heritage and convention. Finally, the relationship between man and the supernatural is established by the concept of the Mandate of Heaven. Heaven, as the highest spiritual authority, judges human conduct and holds the human world, individually as well as collectively, responsible. Such piety toward transcendental power in the minds of the ancient Chinese is responsive to the august Heaven and therefore reciprocal.

[8] Hsu and Linduff (1988).

The Confucian Turn

Karl Jaspers listed Confucius as the representative figure of the Chinese Axial Age breakthrough. Chinese also traditionally consider Confucius to be the ultimate sage who inaugurated Chinese high civilization by creating the system of thought known as Confucianism. There is no question that Confucius is an epoch-making figure. Nevertheless, as I indicate in the above, the Chinese "cultural genes" had been formed before his time. Additionally, although the English-language term "Confucianism" is formed directly from the great sage's name, the original Chinese term, Ju-chia, contains no reference to Confucius at all. The word "Ju", as some historians have suggested, held two meanings. The first denoted experts of ritual, ceremony and archival materials—the scribes and diviners who rendered their services to the aristocracy. The second, a newer meaning which I believe was consciously defined by Confucius, Mencius and other great Confucian scholars, denoted the carriers of the cultural heritage.

Confucius lived in a time of chaos and disorder, the Chou feudal system was in the throes of disintegration. The meanings of the old customs and values were lost, and an ideological vacuum ensued.[9] New meanings of life and relationships to others emerged, along with new ideas about man's relationship to the cosmos. This intellectual environment corresponds with what Eisenstadt called the period of "breaking down" that would lead to a breakthrough—a circumstance familiar to others who are currently dealing with Jaspers' concept of Axial Age breakthrough. Confucius makes a most significant contribution by redefining the terms and rituals of the era before his time. As he himself claimed once, he was not an innovator; he was an interpreter. He chose "Jen" to define humanness and humanity, and used that concept as a source from which to derive rituals such as filial piety, loyalty, faithfulness and a sense of justice. In doing so, he actually transformed the code of behavior of the aristocratic community of the ancient feudal society into a set of universal values that might prevail in human society broadly conceived.

Confucius often mentioned "Tao", the Great Principle which should be understood as the way of Heaven and of humanity, both

[9] Hsu (1965).

were manifested by the Heavenly Mandate. In the dimension of the human world the Great Principle is revealed in a cardinal virtue of "Jen", which, I think, should be understood as humanness, the very nature endowed to humanity. Fulfilling such a potential of humanness is the privilege as well as the obligation of any individual. Such a potential is by definition embodied in the Mandate of Heaven, as such its fulfillment is obligatory . With "Jen" as a foundation, a whole range of criteria of human conduct, i.e. an entire value system is construed.[10]

Returning to what I said earlier regarding the triad of Chinese "cultural genes", I suggest first that when Confucius and his disciples refer to tolerance (Chung) and tolerance (Shu) as being the most significant components of humanity (Jen), they actually define the most basic rules of interaction with other individuals. Secondly, in the notions of filial piety (paying respect to one's ancestors) and of showing reverence to the past, they redefined the genes of temporal concern with respect to tradition. Finally, the sense of propriety and the emphasis on unity between heaven and man became a cosmic concern—the third part of the triad. Uniting all these three elements together, the centerpiece is humanity (Jen). In other words, from the days of Confucius, the Axial Age breakthrough in Chinese culture was an affirmation of the centrality of human beings. This human-centered world is organized around an individual with appropriately patterned human relationships that maintain continuity between the past and the future, and between this world and the cosmos.

A complete transformation cannot, of course, be achieved in a single generation, and from Confucius' time until the second century BCE Chinese thinkers debated continuously. The other schools—such as the Mohists, several kinds of Taoists, and the practitioners of state affairs—would raise questions around similar issues. Different generations of Confucius' followers would try to respond to these other schools, sometimes assimilating their opponents' notions into the Confucian system, and thereby enriching and expanding the ideologies of both the Confucian school and its critics. Three or four centuries of ceaseless dialogue and discourse eventually completed the transformation. In conventional textbooks of Chinese intellec-

[10] Schwartz (1985), 73-81.

tual history, these various contending schools are treated as distinctive blocks of scholars who adhere to their own respective ideologies. Others have convincingly argued that this era should be perceived as four centuries of exchange and growth in one arena of intellectual articulation.[11] I would venture to suggest that Confucius and his school were disenchanted with the past tradition of the sacredness of the jade cult and ancestor worship. Confucius and his school broke with this mythical tradition by bringing in the human world.

I also would point out that these contending scholars were not necessarily people in the central-plain heartland of Confucianism. The Mohists came from the territory of the older Shang kingdom where they still remembered that they were not Chou people. Scholars from coastal zones kept long memories of local traditions and legends. The most important challengers to Confucianism, the Taoists, were heavily concentrated in the land of the great Southern power, Chu, whose natural and cultural heritage was quite distinct from that of the North China central plain. I think this discourse between and among regional cultures is a phenomenon overlooked in Chinese studies. In other words, I see the stimulus of inter-regional confrontation and interaction as being crucial to this long period of debate. For comparison, consider the case of Christianity, which is also the product of inter-regional discourse among Judaic, Egyptian and Greek traditions, perhaps also incorporating Babylonian influence in earlier days and European paganism later. The Chinese case may not be more complicated than that of the gradual transformations of Christianity, but a cherished image of an eternal and unified China has prevented us from understanding China as a complex of many regional cultures.

Imperial Unification

By the third century BCE, China was unified by the Ch'in-Han emperors. The military conquest followed an enormous loss of human life. Strangely, however, even as early as the fourth century BCE, people had been prepared to think that this world called "China" was to be unified into a single universal state. It seems that cultural

[11] Hsiao (1979).

universalism as well as economic regional interdependency had prepared the ground for political unification. The outcome of the game seemed to have been predicted at the outset, with the only disagreement between players being who would win, and win all.[12] The state setting of a political empire that governed a territory as large as all of Europe, cut off from much of the world by natural boundaries, created a mentality of universality. Imperial authority was to be over all subjects. China was virtually a world unto itself, and even the cosmic order was understood to be little more than a counterpart to the order established in that imperial world.[13]

Therefore, in the first two centuries of the Chin-Han periods (that is, the third and second centuries, BCE) both private and state sectors made an effort to organize encyclopedic compilations of knowledge. Their intention was to organize the cosmos, the human world, the state and the human body into a coherent whole. Every single piece—whether a celestial body, a constellation, a mountain, a river, a living creature, a bone or an organ—must fall into its proper place in a comprehensively coherent cosmic order. In this, we can see the impact of the formation of political empire on the mentality of the intellectuals of the time.[14]

It seems probable that an authoritarian state would prefer a vision of cosmic order that directly legitimized its own stable power. Ironically, in the Chinese mind by that time, these several layers of cosmic order interacted with each other to reach an equilibrium that was not static, but rather a constantly-adjusting dynamic system. It therefore gave the scholars the right to criticize political authority, students the right to question their masters, and even peasants the right to revolt if they saw an imbalance in the cosmic order. Some intellectuals, therefore, proclaimed themselves guardians of the true cosmic order. They became seers, who raised protest and criticism against wrong-doings. Apocalyptic documents were organized, and even the term "sage" meant "the one who sees and listens", etymologically speaking.[15]

It took the determined interference of the imperial court, after a period of dynastic change around the beginning of the Common Era,

[12] Pines (2000).
[13] Schram (ed.) (1987).
[14] Paper (1974).
[15] Loewe (1974) and Wang (2000).

to stop such a movement towards scholasticism and textual criticism on the part of the intellectuals. The classics, as a result, were canonized, and high culture thereby crystallized—or, from another perspective, was standardized. Thus, Chinese intellectual culture after the beginning of the Common Era was completely different from what it had been two centuries earlier. Again, we see a prevailing intellectual thirst for challenge and new ideas. This was another kind of condition—not a breakdown, but intellectual impoverishment—that would create a vacuum into which new ideas and new values could be introduced.[16]

Cultural Confrontations

Buddhism arrived at this particular moment. With its other-worldliness and stress on individualism, it ran directly counter to the collectivism and the worldliness of Confucian China. I see the rise of Taoist religion as a response to Buddhism from the non-intellectual sector of Chinese society, crafted by non-elite thinkers in the countryside and hinterland who pieced together the remnants of Shamanism, Animism and other ancient traditions drawn from the lowest echelons of society. Over the course of the first millennium CE, there was a constant and ongoing process of contention, rebuff and reorganization among the Confucians, Buddhists and Taoists in the Chinese intellectual arena.[17]

One crucial aspect of the Buddhist impact upon Chinese culture occurred in the sphere of metaphysics, comparatively underdeveloped in Confucianism. The Sung Confucian School of Reason (the Li-hsueh) and the Ming Confucian School of Mind (the Hsin-hsueh) are the result of the Buddhist challenge to the Great Principle (Tao), as discussed in preceding sections. This requires further explanation. In Buddhism, the concept of dharma represents not simply a law of doctrine but a phenomenon. Confucians needed a concept such as Tao to link the transcendental cosmic force and the Confucian worldly concern for humanity. Thus, the Sung Confucian Chu Hsi, the great master of Neo-Confucianism, in the twelfth century CE declared that the Confucian principle is just what heaven has en-

[16] Hsu (1986).
[17] Zurcher (1959).

dowed, called Nature, and that the human mind is the agency which reveals the principle. Chu Hsi regards all operation and function in the human world as being none other than revelation of the Principle of Heaven. Chu Hsi's interpretation provoked revision by his contemporary Lu Chiu-yuan, who identified mind with the principle of reasoning. This identification would later be fully articulated by Wang Yang-ming (or Wang Shou-jen) in the mid-sixteenth century CE, although Wang Yang-ming challenged Chu Hsi's emphasis on rationality. Both schools argued that the erstwhile transcendental Principle of Heaven is actually perceived and revealed in the human mind by human reasoning power. New meanings of Tao significantly connect this world of humanity with the transcendental Principle in early Confucian-Taoist tradition.[18]

This situation made numerous developments possible. Hatred and antagonism could lead to violence as each of the three sides competed for state preference at the expense of the others. In the long run, however, the thousand-year struggle among different cultures—Chinese versus foreign, upper-class versus lower-class, literati versus the illiterate—ultimately dwindled. The result was a sinicized Buddhism, a Confucianism that was reoriented to address metaphysical issues, and an incorporation of certain aspects of Taoist cult practice into formal organized religion. While the Neo-Confucianism of the Sung-Ming eras absorbed much of the Buddhist impact, many Taoist sects simply borrowed Buddhist rituals and Confucian ethics for their own use. At the same time, the original Buddhist sects were replaced by ones that had been born in China, such as the Pure-Land and Zen schools. In a broad sense, this thousand years witnessed a long development toward another synthesis of Chinese mentalities, cross-bred from Confucianism, Taoism and Buddhism, in which the three original "genetic" elements remained central.

By the sixteenth century CE, another foreign religion arrived in China. The learned Jesuit Matteo Ricci and his successors made a great effort to spread Christianity in China. Some of them pursued missionary work among intellectuals and the court, while the Dominicans and Franciscans worked instead in the coastal areas among traders, craftsmen and sailors.[19] Neither group achieved anything

[18] Chan (1963), Chan (1967) and Ching (1976).
[19] Hay (1957) and Spence (1984).

resembling the impact of the Buddhist monks a thousand years before them. Although the Jesuits introduced into China some western sciences and technology, the impact remained limited, because the sciences in Europe lagged behind scientific development within China. Moreover, Catholic theology could hardly render serious challenges to the Confucianism–Taoism–Buddhism triad.

Here we have a case of cultural confrontation, yet one that seemed to result in relatively little inter-cultural enrichment or mutual adjustment. This was true until the days of gunboat diplomacy and the encroachment of Western imperial powers when Western science, technology and capitalist institutions stormed over China with the same enormous momentum they did in most of the world. In the era preceding the Opium War, however, Western cultural influence in China was rather limited. The contrast between the introduction of Buddhism and Christianity into China should, I believe, be attributed to the strength of the new synthesis reached among Confucians, Taoists and Buddhists in the Sung-Ming era. The Chinese cultural environment had been integrated with socio-economic institutions. There simply was no great vacuum waiting to be filled. There was solidarity in this society organized upon the foundation of lineages and communities, supported by an economy of labor intensive farming and cottage-industry, with a nation-wide rural marketing network, and with a political system consisting of a monarchy which claimed to have received the Mandate of Heaven, staffed by civil servants who were trained in Confucian education and recruited by means of an open civil examination.

This socio-economic network also propelled the Confucian elite along paths of government careers and to communal leadership after retirement. Confucian values of Jen (humanness), filial piety and propriety justified these institutions. After that period, when Europeans opened new horizons of intellectual pursuit (the gradual appearance of science and technology), the traditional Chinese mind had been so conformed that the new knowledge and new way of thinking faced rejection. Then, in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, rather than a mere problem of filling a gap in tradition, we find a complete breakdown of the Chinese cultural system. Will this new breakdown actually create the conditions for a new breakthrough? Will that breakthrough be a universal one, shared by most members of human society in this world?

Axiality and Modernity

Eisenstadt has introduced concept "multiple modernities" as a possible explanation for the developmental patterns of the descendants of Axial Age civilizations who cannot completely shed their cultural heritages—in other words, their cultural genes. Each of these older civilizations may breed its own modernity. Among the major cultural systems in our world today the Judaic, Christian, and Islamic systems share monotheism, while the Indian and Chinese systems appear considerably and distinctively different from the former three systems and from each other. I believe it is necessary for global human society to preserve a broad variety of "cultural genes", in a manner similar to the biological concern for preservation of a large biological gene pool so that future generations of human society may find alternatives to those offered by mainstream society. I believe a true world of multiple-modernities should not be monopolized by the mainstream of today's world. It should be open to future members of the human society to learn from human experiences in the history of different cultural systems if contemporary mainstream culture fails to meet unexpected demands in the future.

The current global economic crisis, for instance, has already signaled that modern capitalism may need repair, especially in the aspect of re-building some professional ethics in a global economy. Nevertheless, the modernity that evolved from Western culture has proven so powerful in the past two hundred years that it may leave little space for people in other cultures, with different heritages, to develop their own counterparts. The modernity that has evolved from the Western heritage since the Enlightenment has always claimed to emphasize humanity and rationality. Ironically, however, over the past century instrumental rationality—with its roots in technology and marketing systems—has dominated the modern mind. Consequently, highly complex organization has become a basic feature of social and political institutions, and seems to have overshadowed any concern about humanity and the independence of individuals. With this concern in mind, I propose that the Chinese cultural heritage—organized as it is around humanity and this worldliness—might easily merge with Western modernity and even lend its genes to help correct such a deviation from Western modernity's other than human-centered nature.

For instance, the Chinese concept of Tao (the Way) could be perceived as a cosmic Principle rather than Divine Will. Such a Principle would fit more coherently with the modern sciences than the concept of Divine Will does. The Mandate of Heaven in the past was supposedly bestowed upon a ruler who would be charged with a duty to govern. However, the Mandate of Heaven can also be interpreted as a responsibility for the human races to cohabit with other segments of this universe wherein there can be numerous layers of subsystems, all being parts of the Principle. Another illustration, the Chinese concept of Jen can be potentially helpful to enrich our concerns about the dignity of human beings, as individuals and as a collectivity of human society in the global sense. Jen, or humanness by definition, describes the characteristics of man who is such a unique creature in this world. Human beings, individually or collectively, endowed with their human nature, should have the opportunity to fulfill their great potential, intellectually, physically, and socially. The discourse of human rights can therefore be addressed within the framework of the concept of Jen. Today the piety of religious faith is ebbing. When "God is dead", it is no longer convincing anymore to ask a Divine personality and his Will to be the guarantor of human rights. Self-esteem of humanity ought to be the foundation of human rights. Confucius' mention of using one's own feelings, or self-esteem, to comprehend the rights of others and their feelings can be a common ground upon which human rights as well as democracy of communal contract can be reconstructed.

In conclusion, I suggest that the process of achieving a breakthrough contributed as much as the Axial Age breakdown did to the shaping of a complex cultural system in China. As I have attempted to illustrate in the above, Confucius made a highly significant contribution to building Chinese culture although the basic "cultural genes" that distinguish Confucian Chinese civilization were already present well before his time. Changes along the course of China's cultural development were probably the consequence of interaction and exchange between two or more cultures: the Neolithic-Age cultures of North China, the Northern and Southern cultures in the Classical Era, or India and China at the time of Buddhism's arrival. We now find ourselves on the threshold of an era of global dialogue that will again involve several cultural systems. I believe that the experience of the Chinese past will likely prove to have been

only a rehearsal of the next stage of global integration that will bring together various cultural systems into a common human culture in this world.

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THE AXIAL MILLENNIUM IN CHINA: A BRIEF SURVEY

CHRISTOPH HARBSMEIER

When one considers the historical development of mankind an indisputable proliferation of agricultural, technological, social, political, artistic and intellectual breakthroughs during the last four millennia BC are apparent. Agriculture enabled many people and peoples to rise above the level of hunting and subsistence economy throughout the world. A comprehensive historical narrative of these developments would necessarily involve a detailed picture of the entire interactive gamut of environmental, social, political, technological, artistic, and intellectual factors which contributed to this development. Critical historical analysis should differentiate from this infinite "manifold" events that can be examined in sufficient analytic detail to be of interest.

Surviving writing systems are so useful in this connection because written sources and writing practices often remain accessible to us on a large scale, and for detailed analysis. Writing systems were developed from the fourth millennium BCE onwards as instruments of governmental and ritual/religious record-keeping in polities of increasing size and complexity in Mesopotamia.

Sustained writing practices arrived in China so much later than in the Middle East that it is natural to look for evidence of a Middle Eastern impetus of some kind motivating the remarkably sudden development of an advanced writing system around 1240 BCE.[1] In any case there is no question of contemporaneous development of writing among the ancient civilisations of the ancient world.

Mesopotamian influence on Jewish and Greek civilisations went far beyond writing systems: it was religious, literary, as well as intellectual. Hellenistic influence on Jewish developments turned out

[1] See Keightley (1985), 203.

to be in many ways intellectually overwhelming. It would eventually transform the Christian Jewish sect into an integral part of the Hellenised intellectual universe.

The divinisation of King Gilgamesh of Uruk around 2650 BCE led to the gradual written fixation of an epic of remarkable religious, emotional and intellectual subtlety. Even the Ninivite extensively rewritten new version of this large epic dates to 1000 BCE, well before the written versions of the Homeric epics.

The Gilgamesh epic implied and developed a fluctuating cosmography beautifully illustrated and described in Bottéro (1992), 13.

The wisdom literature associated with the name Imhotep (2700 BCE) may be lost, but there seems to be no doubt that it existed and was historically important. It antedated the Axial Age by 2000 years.

The Old Testament is firmly embedded in, and profoundly shaped by, the complex pattern of Middle Eastern religious and secular traditions of wisdom literature. We may perhaps be dealing with an account of creation ex nihilo in the Old Testament, but it is not as if we have an explosive development of high civilisation ex nihilo in the Axial Age.

Given the manifest and growing evidence for the continuous interdependence of historical development in these civilisations of the world, the hypothesis of an heroic Axial Age of contemporaneous radical change in the first millennium BCE requires strong and well-defined empirical evidence to become substantial and interesting for discussion.

The doxography concerning the Axial Age from Karl Jaspers onwards, even the pre-history of this concept, have been discussed by others. In this paper I shall neither interpret nor revise Jaspers. Instead I want to specify a series of intellectual areas in which one might suspect that radical breakthroughs were contemporary in the first millennium BCE, and neither before nor after. The test case I want to discuss in a comparative spirit is that of China.

As far as I know there is little direct evidence of Mesopotamian or other Middle Eastern substantial intellectual inspiration or direct influence on pre-Buddhist Chinese intellectual developments. The case of possible early Indian influences is more complicated.[2]

[2] Conrady (1906) argues for interaction. Victor Mair has suggested such early Indian influences in many publications. (See e.g. Mair (1990, 1990a, 1994). Com-

Strong linguistic Indo-European links with ancient China have long attracted attention and continue to be discussed.[3]

China offers itself as a useful testing ground for any theory of an Axial Age.

I believe the concrete agenda for such a discussion is best based on categories that emerge from a detailed study of the early primary sources and not from a generalist perspective.

I find it helpful to construct an Enlightenment style scheme of dimensions of radical intellectual innovation to organise a discussion of developments in the Axial Age. This scheme is not a scheme of historical development, but a list of dimensions on different levels of abstraction under which one might want to measure breakthroughs. One might have chosen many other dimensions.

Firstly, there is the sustained attempt at focussed *elaboration* of certain areas of knowledge. For example, it is one thing to have a diffuse notion of the cosmos, of cosmography. It is quite another thing to systematically collect what is known about the topography of the known universe. The question arises only when and where systematic descriptive cosmography developed. In China, this was notably developed from around the third century BCE. The Shanhaijing, "The Classic of Mountains and Seas" (see Birrell 1999) collects much early descriptive material.

Secondly, there is the attempt at a sustained *explanation* of why something that has been elaborated, actually is the way it is. For example, in China, this explanatory attempt to account for the reasons why the world is the way it is, the focus on aetiology, is as old as the twelfth century BCE: the oracle bone inscriptions of that age ask persistently for the underlying causes of all sorts of events.

Third, there is the sustained attempt at *problematisation* of explanations offered. For example, given an explanation of rain in terms of ancestral malign influence, one might argue about the justification of this account and its reliability. Sustained problematisation of this kind occurred in China only during the first century CE, notably in the work of Wang Chong.

Fourth, there is the sustained attempt at *systematisation* of an area

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pare also Vasil'ev (1976), Vasil'ev (1982) for an extreme view. Sivin and Lloyd (2002), 294, note 34 mention a relevant archeological controversy.

[3] See Wang (1995) and the International Journal of Chinese Linguistics vol. 1, no. 1 from Hong Kong 1996.

of knowledge that has been elaborated, explained and problematised. This is a rare configuration which is crucial for the history of science. The earliest marked case of this is in the Mohist Canons of the third century BCE.

Fifth, there is the sustained attempt at *relativisation* so as to recognise as merely subjective one's systematisations, problematisations and systematisations. The earliest case of this is again in the fourth century BCE, in the philosophy of Zhuangzi.

Leaving aside what was meant by or should be meant by an expression like "Axial Age", it is quite striking that when measured along all these parameters of analysis—however vaguely perceived and defined—the first millennium BCE turns out to have marked decisive breakthroughs that were unprecedented in Chinese intellectual history. Significantly, Chinese intellectuals in later centuries and later millennia have continued to pay disproportionate attention to developments in China during the first millennium BCE, as a common cultural reference point and a "classical age".

The invention and secularisation of writing lead to an explosive bout of intellectual breakthroughs in China. This is so striking that it has mislead many scholars traditionally to underestimate the creativity of later ages. Here it must be emphasised, for example, that the great age of individualism and argumentative abstract metaphysics is not the Axial Age, but the third and fourth century CE. The efflorescence of popular religion took place during the Late Han and after, not during the Axial Age. The striking development of sophisticated lyrical poetry occurred during the Tang and preceding centuries, not the Axial Age. The golden age of the development of drama in China was characteristic of the Yuan dynasty and following centuries, certainly not the Axial Age. The creative age of the novel accompanied the Ming and the Qing, not the Axial Age.

Thus the traditional picture of a creative classical age down to the Han, followed by a scholastic age of basically regurgitative elaboration, supplemented by foreign impacts like that of Buddhism down to the Qing, and then the age of westernising globalisation in the twentieth century is deeply misleading.

And yet, it remains true that all breakthroughs and innovations in China have tended to be articulated by linking them hermeneutically or otherwise to the classical age of that first millennium BCE, the Axial Age.

In what follows I shall briefly outline the Chinese breakthroughs,

during the Axial Age, in areas including cosmology, medicine, historiography, political theory, lexicography, and finally of rhetoric, as I see them at this stage and as limited space allows. Within each of these areas I shall look for relevant evidence of

A. Elaboration
B. Explanation
C. Problematisation
D. Systematisation
E. Relativisation

in the senses roughly indicated above.

Cosmology

The case of cosmology is of special privileged interest, and it raises a number of generally important theoretical issues.

Many peoples of the world have a folklore of cosmologonical myths of various kinds, anthropomorphic and otherwise. Some have developed these myths into more or less coherent and more or less sizeable pieces of folk literature or narrative tradition. Only few cultures have elaborated the story of the origin of the universe into elaborated detailed written accounts of the processes by which the world came to be as it is.

In fifteenth century BCE China, for example, I know of no written records, and no other records provide any explicit evidence concerning beginnings of cosmology. The earliest substantial inscriptions I know of are from the thirteenth century. By the first century BCE, systems of cosmology had become elaborated in considerable detail.

Michael Loewe writes, understandably: "in neither mythology nor philosophy can there be found the idea of creatio ex nihilo".[4] To what extent there is creatio ex nihilo in the Old Testament, remains of course a moot point. For example in Guanzi 41, which probably dates to the early third century BCE, the initial creation of the Five Agents/Phases is emphatically attributed to the mythical Yellow Emperor, after his creation of the Five Sounds.[5] Zhuangzi certainly plays with the idea of a potter-creator, but the image of a creator manifestly in possession of pre-existing material to work with. It turns

[4] See Loewe (1982), 63.
[5] See Puett (2001), 131ff.

out that the ancient Chinese must be said to be able to think, in principle, in terms of creation, for the simple reason that they commonly did think and write that way!

The profound question addresses the type of discourse in which the ancient Chinese speak of matters cosmological. For example, when Zhuangzi refers to the "Creator of things", he is being playful. He is not seriously proposing a theory of creation, but he is playing with an idea of creation in which a transcendent being fashions the things of the world as a potter might fashion a pot. But this is a narrative accident: Zhuangzi found the vision of the potter with his clay more vivid than that of a creator in nihilo, who brings it about that instead of there being nothing (except Himself) there is something.

Guo Xiang (ca. CE 252-312) asks as follows, towards the end of Chapter 2 of the Zhuangzi: "Some people in the world consider that Penumbra depends on the Shadow, that Shadow depends on shapes, and that shapes depend on the Creator (zao wu zhe)." He continues to *reject* creation. He finds it worth rejecting because it is entirely conceivable to the Chinese at that late stage.

At an earlier stage, in the Questions to Heaven, an early part of the Songs of the South, the puzzling question is raised: "who first/ in the beginning created these (scil. the Heavens)?"[6] And still earlier, in the Book of Changes, in the first hexagram, the word yuan was traditionally interpreted as the beginning of all things, an ancient gloss being "beginning", and this "beginning" being plausibly seen as the beginning of the world. And that beginning perhaps being due to "Heaven". The question here, as in the Questions to Heaven may be something like this: "Yes! But who created the Heavens themselves?"

This is not the place to argue the above tentative and experimental interpretations in any detail. What matters is that on the one hand the notion of a beginning of the world was not unthinkable, but rejected, and, similarly, the notion of creation was conceivable, but not very prominent in ancient Chinese thought.

In ancient China we find no culturally important or central detailed and elaborated aetiological account of the universe to paral-

[6] See also Hawkes (1985), 127. For bibliography on most of the ancient texts quoted below see Loewe (1993).

lel Genesis, or to put it more fashionably: there was no obligatory foundational myth. No one felt culturally obliged to believe in one account or other of the origins of the universe. There is no elaborated and authoritative genetic narrative explanation of why exactly the world is the way it is in pre-Buddhist times. Instead there are a plethora of conflicting cosmological speculations in terms of Yin and Yang, the Five Agents/Phases, and the mysteries of the Book of Changes.

Underlying this situation is a deeper problem about the nature of some of the pre-Han and early Han cosmological discourse in ancient China. Given the dearth of sources we have tended to take all cosmology-related talk at face value, as seriously held and upheld views on the nature of the world. But there is the very serious question of the rhetoric of these sources. There is the problem to what extent our oldest Chinese sources on the origin and the overall structure of the universe had a rhetorical light touch. The exacerbating contradictions in the records we have of correlative thinking may be exacerbating only when their sources are being misread by being taken a trifle too literally, too seriously.

However this may be, the Huainanzi (compiled 139 BCE), for example, turns out to contain a remarkably serious and systematic work in the history of Chinese cosmology. On the one hand it makes a sustained attempt to explain how and why the universe developed the way it did. On the other, it provides an extensively elaborated and remarkably quantified system of astronomic cosmography.[7] This quantificatory elaboration of cosmography was certainly a breakthrough in the intellectual history of the first millennium. One source of this elaboration was the bureaucratic organisation of the pursuit and publication of knowledge.[8]

The systematisation of cosmologies was achieved by Cai Yong (CE 133-192), who distinguished three traditional cosmologies: the domed universe school, the celestial circles school and the infinite empty space school.[9]

The playful problematisation of cosmogonies and cosmographies seems to be in literary evidence in the book that bears the name of the philosopher Zhuangzi (fourth century BCE).

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[7] See ch. 3 in Major (1993).
[8] See Needham (1975) and Sivin and Lloyd (2002), 253-71.
[9] See Needham (1975), 87ff.

At the same time we find a most remarkable streak of relativism in the book Zhuangzi, a relativism that has its intellectual foundations in the very playful problematisation of cosmological discourse which is such a distinctive feature of the book.

The unparalleled cosmological breakthrough in China consisted in the quantification of cosmology in the first millennium BCE, and the attempt at a systematic taxonomy of cosmologies very early in the first millennium CE.

History

Tales of the past are a natural and integral part of the folklore of most peoples. It is when these are organised into chronologically consistent annals and elaborated into comprehensive accounts of extended periods of history that the first breakthrough appears. In particular, the systematisation establishing synchrony between different annalistic series is an intellectual and historical breakthrough.

Extensive bureaucratic record-keeping of important politico-religious and ritual events began late in the second millennium BCE. Over 50,000 inscriptions that have come down to us from this time bear elaborate witness to a sustained, vivid and detailed concern for the recording of the past. At many points, we can follow the politico-religious history of the important events during these times from day to day.

Historical annalistic record-keeping became radically more systematic during what is known as the Spring and Autumn period (ca. 770-464 BCE) which takes its name from the famous court chronicle for that time called simply Springs and Autumns in classical Chinese. Thus, systematic attention was paid to standardised historical record-keeping early in the first millennium BCE.

Towards the middle of the first millennium, the striking narrative elaboration of these early chronicles into animated and psychologically as well as historically subtle discourses was achieved in the largest book we have from ancient China, the Zuozhuan (fourth century BCE).[10] In the Zuozhuan historical explanations are offered

[10] See Legge (1961) and Schaberg (2001). It is significant that the title of this work translates, akwardly, as "Zuo Tradition" and involves no reference to any "Master" Zuo.

en passant. There is nothing in the first millennium like the preface to Thucydides with its methodological focus on historical explanation versus narrative. Even in the great age of systematic historiography, the first century BCE, any discussion of reasons, motivations, and causes was regarded (and mostly disregarded) as "empty language" because it was not straightforwardly factual.[11]

A striking breakthrough in systematicity of historical description was achieved when Sima Tan and his son Sima Qian undertook their project which came to be known as the Records of the Historian: here the Han empire was given a comprehensive historical pedigree in terms of three preceding dynasties, of which the Han was presented as the legitimate successor. And what these comprehensive Records of the Historian describe are not just the succession of events. Also important historical personalities are given their biographies, and special areas like that of economics, music/dance, and the calendar have monographs devoted to them. Thus we have, in the Records of the Historian a comprehensive book that aims to be something of a historical encyclopaedia.

Sima Qian occasionally focused on historical explanations, but problematisation, the reasoned discussion of competing explanations, never flourished in China during the first millennium BCE. It was the bureaucratic systematisation of historiography that was carried a great deal further in the Records of the Historian than it was in any work that survives from ancient Greece or Rome. (But note Jia Yi's unique work on the fall of the Qin.)

The historical perspective tended very much to remain sinocentric, and the question what kind of history of China the barbarians would have written was never focussed in any detail. Thus the cultural subjectivity of the Chinese view of history never became a main focus of attention, although here again there are many places in Zhuangzi, where the spirit of such historical relativism is felt to be very much present.

An interesting partial systematisation of biography is available in the Array of Accounts of Women and the Array of Accounts of Immortals (see O'Hara 1945 and Kaltenmark 1987), and the thematic systematisation of biographic attention is significant.

Reflexive biographic attention is not elaborated in China before

[11] See two recent controversial books on the Zuozhuan: Pines (2002) and Schaberg (2001).

the first century CE, and in the last chapter of the remarkably rich Weighing Discourses in the Balance. (See Forke (1962). Note that Sima Qian's autobiographic private letter to his friend Ren An was not included in his Records of the Historian.

Politics

Many peoples, ancient and modern, have ways of talking about the authority of their leadership and what we would call the political state of their society. Advice on how to govern properly one's state, and states in general, is common in wisdom literature throughout the world. The mythological, religious, or even moral justification of current structures of political dominance is a pervasive feature of a large number of cultures, traditional and modern.

In China, the elaborated historical derivation of these structures of dominance of the House of Zhou is marked in such texts as the Documents[12] and the Odes.[13] These may be regarded as plain cases of political/ideological written discourse. Also the bronze inscriptions do contain much legitimising discourse, although, perhaps, one would not find it natural to speak of "elaboration" in this context.

The moral rationalisation and the moral justification of the authority of the House of Zhou continued to be elaborated and to an increasing extent even problematised in a range of early Confucian texts like the Analects, the Mencius, and the Xunzi of the fifth to third centuries BCE.

The non-specific and apolitically abstract problematisation of such justifications was evident in anarchistic writings later subsumed under the Taoist school, expecially the Zhuangzi, although there never seems to have been any confrontational literary problematising revolt against the authority of the ruling dynasty, not even when it was about to fall. Negative comment on the rule of a dynasty comes, as a rule, after the regime change, as it were post festum.

A further step in the systematisation of political theory was notably attempted by such writers as Han Fei (third century BCE). Indeed, what came to be construed as the Legalist school in later times can be analysed as a highly diverse group of systematisers of a detradi-

[12] See Legge (1960).
[13] See Karlgren (1941).

tionalised and thus, as it were, historically secularised, social technology of political control.

The encyclopaedic systematisation of possible or real alternative political systems, on the other hand, as we know it in the Greek interest in comparing different constitutions and in Greek political theory organised by Aristotle, was unknown in China, if only because until modern times the reflective "loop" of regarding the forms of government as a product of human decisions and social actions, did not apparently occur in China until it was triggered by contact with the West. Since no alternative to monarchy was ever contemplated even to be rejected in the first millennium BCE, monarchy was not an intellectual issue. The problematisation of the constitutional organisation of a polity was not achieved in pre-modern China. A limited case of problematisation does, on the other hand, occur in the extraordinary work of Huang Zongxi (1610-1695).

Ritual

Ritual prescriptions were a common subject for written discourse in many civilisations, and this was the case well before the first millennium BCE.

The detailed elaboration of the social rules of propriety that provide the glue of society as well as the elaboration of the economic techniques necessary to provide the socio-economic base for any polity developed markedly later than the elaborations in the field of more specifically political/religious authority.

The Confucian Analects concentrate less on the detailed elaboration of ritual proprieties, and certainly not on the detailed specification of what is involved in social duties/rectitude (although the late Book 10 of the Analects is indeed descriptively very concrete). Instead, the Confucian Analects tend to focus on the argumentative justification of the fundamental or basic character of these notions in any moral system. Xunzi forcefully continues this tradition.

Thus, in the Analects we find a recognition of the socially crucial role of ritual propriety and social duty/rectitude (li/yi) for any socially meaningful scheme of moral philosophy. Ritual is placed in an explanatory context, and not just preached as moral exhortation.

Around the second century BCE, the ritual compendium Yili provides the sort of exhaustive and exhausting elaborative specification of the general ritual court rules which contrast interestingly with the

more private, anecdotally and personally specified, rules described in the Analects Book 10.

Perhaps around the same time, the third and second centuries BCE, the Zhou Rituals[14] draw an exhaustive idealised picture of court organisation and court procedure that formally bureaucratises the social rules and integrates them into a system, where the bureaucracy becomes something of a ritual templum mundi. Through systematised ritual, human life is integrated into an overall cosmic scheme in much of later Chinese writing towards the end of the first millennium BCE.

The Records of Ritual (fourth to second century BCE),[15] on the other hand, greatly elaborates the explanatory and philosophical context of ritual rules from a variety of philosophical and practical perspectives.

Ritual rules are explained in the first millennium BC, but they are not justified against any anti-ritual scepticism.

Logic

Drawing logical conclusions from premises is common in primates, it would certainly seem to be universal among humans. Making such logical reasoning explicit in writing is very irregularly prevalent in various civilisations, and at differing stages of civilisations.

The Shang dynasty oracle bones of the late second millennium BCE have no occasion to elaborate reasoning, and they certainly are very far from any elaboration of complex logical patterns of thought.

In the latter half of the first millennium, Chinese thinkers increasingly addressed this problematic with conventional questions like "How do we know that this is so?" They increasingly felt that their statements needed the support of demonstrations, logically structured reasoning, though argumentation from historical example remained a preferred method. An appeal to the authority of the sagely opinion as such would certainly be excluded in most of these contexts. This persistent question marks a crucial breakthrough in scientific method. It is not as if the current ritual appeal to distant sages replaced argumentation and demonstration in ancient China. Objec-

[14] See Biot (1851).
[15] See Courvreur (1951) and Wilhelm (1930).

tions, customarily introduced by "someone might say (i.e. object)" did not generally come up with alternative references to archaic sages, and were met by further explanation and argumentation, and not typically by further ritual appeal to the authority of sages.[16] All of this, for all I know, may be present in many early civilisations. And significantly, from the last centuries of the first millennium onwards, rhetorical appeal to sages became much more persistent. And, of course, the polite rhetoric of insisting that one's knowledge was only a recovery of what the ancient sages already knew has a very long tradition in China. It is the task of the intellectual historian to differentiate that (socially explicable) rhetoric from the (intellectually crucial) argumentative practice. Façons de parler must not be taken at face value.

The explanation of logical forms themselves, however, requires a reflexive intellectual loop that is exceedingly rare in human history, and it is attested to have arisen independently only in three civilisations, Indian, Chinese, and Greek. There is no question that Gongsun Long (late fourth century BCE) engaged in elaborate explanation of logical subjects, and in the best of his dialogues he certainly problematises his own explanations in the sense that he explicates serious and threatening objections against them in detail, in order then to refute them.

Gongsun Long remains concerned with individual issues that captured his logical imagination and which he hoped would capture the imagination of his audience. Hui Shi (also late fourth century BCE)[17] began to systematise such issues that were of logical and scientific interest by collecting relevant logical paradoxes quite systematically.[18]

New levels of systematisation within the field of logical and conceptual analysis were achieved by the Later Mohists, who interdefined systems of concepts and began to construct basic rules for discourse logic. (See Graham (1978)). It is often said that their well-defined tendencies towards a systemic rationalism were not much appreciated in their time, or at any time afterwards, so that their texts have manifestly been transmitted by scribes who understood nothing of

[16] See Harbsmeier (1998), 261-85.
[17] See Kou (1953).
[18] See Harbsmeier (1998), 286-97.

what they were transmitting.[19] However, the profound impact of this logical rationalism on the old historical commentaries noted below, and also on systematisation in lexicography, is manifest. This analytic rationalism became formative of later Chinese encyclopaedic thinking.

Astronomy and Mathematics

Counting is common everywhere and at all times. Simple arithmetic operations like addition are common at many times and in many places. Evidence of elaborated, advanced calculations is not common in very many cultures, but extensive elaborated calculations are documented in extremely early Mesopotamian sources and have been the subject of an extensive literature.

Such calculations play an important part, for example, in the Huainanzi (139 BCE)[20] and also in the economic parts of the Guanzi[21] but the focus in these important sources is not on mathematics as such but on such subjects as astronomy. And it is in the field of quantified astronomy (with its important calendrical implications) that the most striking breakthroughs were achieved, with extensive, sustained and quantified elaboration being most strikingly in evidence in ch. 3 of the Huainanzi. However, it is plausible to assume that the needs for government accountancy and economic administration were a powerful impetus to the development of calculation skills in ancient China.

Among the texts from a grave closed around 170 BCE we find the Book on the Procedures of Arithmetic, by far the earliest elaborated text concentrating on calculation as such, but still concentrating on examples, rather than theory. Thus in this crucial source the focus has shifted from the application of mathematics, to the techniques of calculation. Mathematical problems are illustrated through paradigmatic example problems rather than through direct abstract discussion of any mathematical theory. And it is worth noting in this

[19] Chapter 2 of the Zhuangzi could possibly be construed to contain a distinct move in the direction of the relativisation of logical analysis. (See Graham (1981)).

[20] See Major (1993).

[21] See Rickett (1985-1998).

connection that there is no such abstract discussion of theory in Euclid either.[22]

More systematised, but still example-orientated treatments of arithmetic problems may be found in Gnomon of the Zhou Dynasty (late first century CE, see Cullen (1996)) and the Nine Chapters on Arithmetic Procedures (perhaps around first century CE, see Christopher Cullen in Loewe (1993), 19ff).

Thus mathematics, certainly not itself a physical science of any kind whatever, nonetheless, like logic, can be shown to play a seminal part in intellectual history, and in particular in the history of a variety of the social and the physical sciences. This is why no serious history of science is possible without close attention to the logical underpinnings of scientific arguments and scientific inquiry, as well as the mathematical underpinnings of measurement and quantification.

Economics

There is perhaps not very much mythological economic lore from which economic reflection could grow by any process of narrative secularisation which could then invite elaboration. Indeed, there are many cultures and even advanced civilisations which never seem to have focussed very much on economics. To the Greeks, significantly, their word oikonomia meant "household economics", and the economics of city state administration was not a notable focus in ancient Greek intellectual history.

Now the extensive elaboration of written prudence rules of economic planning for a state is a main focus in the book Guanzi (fourth-second century) which for this very reason was much celebrated by Russian Marxist intellectual historians. These rules tended to be dogmatic in the sense that they invited acceptance without reference to any body of reasoning.

However, there are occasions where the variously dated chapters of the Guanzi not only instruct in detail how things should be done, but where they actually go into reasons why things are, economically, the way they are and not otherwise.

The problematisation of these explanations, on the other hand,

[22] For a Chinese text see Wenwu 9 (2000), 85-90.

the recognition of alternative reasoned views and the reasoned acceptance of one rather than another was not part of the style that predominates in the Guanzi. One suspects there might be examples of this, but I am not afraid to admit that I have seen no such cases in this extensive book. However, one would not want to exclude this possibility without a very careful study of the very difficult last chapters of the Guanzi.

On the other hand, there is a great deal of systematicity of approach in economic theory. There is a feeling that whoever compiled this book wanted to cover the main areas of social economy comprehensively. For one thing, the technical matter on economics is collected as a block of fairly coherently economic chapters at the back of the book. Some chapter headings will give an impression of the subjects covered: "On Extravagance in Spending", "The Art of Fiscal Management", "Discourse on Economic Matters", "The State's Store of Grain", "Using Statistics to Control State Finances", "Methods for Coping with Change", "The Best Methods for Insuring Fiscal Control", "Methods for Exploiting the Earth", "Maintaining Stability in State Finances", and finally the massive "Economic Policies". The fairly comprehensive character of the treatment of the problems of the national economy does not amount to anything remotely like an encyclopaedic arrangement of the overall book, but there is a clear attempt at systematic comprehensiveness in the treatment of a subject that is not commonly elaborated in such detail in the other early civilisations before the first millennium BCE.

Economics, politics and philosophy were, of course, inextricably intertwined. Thus, the face-to-face adversarial confrontations of sharply contrasting views on the salt and iron monopolies arranged, with 60 participants, in 81 BCE, was not only an economic discussion, but very much a discussion suffused by all manner of philosophical disagreements.[23] This face-to-face confrontational mode is most widely illustrated in political contexts, from Zuozhuan onwards. In its more intellectual variants, it is abundantly evident, in the many passages of the Analects, where Confucius' friend Zilu is notorious for his confrontational remarks, much focussed in the book Mencius, particularly in the confrontation between Mencius and Gaozi, and richly dramatised in often fictitious ways in the Zhuangzi. Although

[23] See Krol' (1997) and (2001) for a masterful philological and philosophical interpretation of this public debate.

this is so, polemics in ancient China tends to be in writing rather than face-to-face, and it is interesting to note that the public of face-to-face intellectual confrontations seems not to have been the general public of the market-place. The public addressed was at most an invited public, never a general public, as it often was in Greece.

Philosophy

Many if not most cultures throughout the ages recognise special roles for wise men in their societies. These wise men are felt to be important because the focus on what is felt to be important and basic to an orientation in this world, and in life. The wisdom of old age is commonly acknowledged as a source of such authority. In many literate cultures wisdom literature naturally developed as a record of memorabilia in the form of wise sayings by wise old men. Certainly, in Egypt these were remarkably elaborated, and organised into series, perhaps even composed as series, and historians of pre-Socratic philosophy in Greece, when they disregard this older wisdom literature miss a precious opportunity to appreciate the specificity of the intellectual splendour that was in ancient Greece. Paradoxically, it is through such contrastive study that the specific contours of any one culture gain their proper place in the intellectual landscape. And likewise, the proper strengths of any philosophy are only properly appreciated when viewed against the background of those intellectual civilisations that are most closely comparable.

In many civilisations, as in China, philosophy moved from court advice to court philosophy (analogous with court poetry), and then only gradually, philosophy became more independent of court interests and the needs of the ruler's courts. Nowhere is the effect of this social context on Chinese philosophy described more graphically, and more vividly, than in Sivin and Lloyd (2002), 77: "Addressing the ground beneath the emperor's feet rather than his august person was not a mode nicely adapted to philosophizing." And yet, while it is true that Chinese writers may talk as if the study of what we today might want to call philosophy, of heaven and earth, was the result of a ruler's intention, it would be singularly naive to imagine that this is how they looked at their efforts in the direction of what we call the human and the natural sciences. Ancient Chinese prefatory material must be read with the same sophisticated sense of his-

torical source criticism as the adulatory prefaces of seventeenth century Europe pretending that writing in this age was for the sake of powerful and infinitely virtuous patrons. Prefaces are important, of course, but very often they merely establish an obligatory and conventional intellectual facade that would not be taken too seriously as self-expression by any experienced historian.

One need not be squeamish about the cross-cultural validity of a concept like that of philosophy. All one has to do is to define what one understands to be philosophy in the context of one's inquiry—and in what hopefully will turn out to be reasonably cross-cultural general terms. This definition will be inevitably stipulative. Philosophy begins, I want to stipulate, where wisdom literature gains three elements that are not self-evident but constitutive of what I want to discuss:

A. a sustained and explicit intention to give reasons for one's conclusions, a willingness to argue why one is right.
B. a sustained and explicit intention to explain what exactly is meant by one's conclusions, a willingness to specify what exactly one means.
C. a sustained and explicit intention to argue for the relevance and overall basic importance of one's conclusions, a willingness to explain why exactly one's conclusions should matter.

I refuse to think it is Eurocentric to say that philosophy crucially involves persistent, sustained attention to the following reflexive question: "Do I make good sense to myself when critically questioning myself in an intellectually 'hostile' manner?" It is this playful hostility to one's own conclusions and arguments that I believe to be one crucial element in the development of any philosophy with "scientific" ambitions.

I refuse to think that giving reasons, saying what one means, and explaining why things matter are in any way communicative practices limited to so-called "high civilisations". Any language which has ways of asking "why?", "what do I/you mean?", "So what?" has all that is needed to do philosophy in the sense that concerns me in this paper. Any developed language will allow the speakers to question their own conclusions and arguments.

On the other hand, being able, in principle, to ask these questions is not the same as asking them in any sustained way. We need to look carefully at the Egyptian wisdom literature, for example, to see to what extent the wise men argued their cases, tried properly

to explain exactly what they meant, and made it clear what was so important in what they were saying.

Pre-Confucian Chinese thinkers produced wisdom literature in that they were dogmatic rather than argumentative, they sound throughout as if they were semantically naive in the sense that they did not expect to be asked about exactly what they mean, and above all they quietly assumed that the importance of what they said was self-evident. In short, they were very much like Solon and his fellow wise men of ancient Greece. They spoke not academically ex cathedra but their arguments, if any, tended to be ex auctoritate.

We do not find Solon being challenged, defending a point of view. We hear him pontificating. And as a poetic pontiff of political wisdom he possibly had a greater historical influence than his more loquacious and argumentative successors.

Pre-Socratic philosophers, then, were not necessarily philosophers in our sense. The point needs careful discussion.

In China, Confucius was undoubtedly a philosopher in our sense because he habitually responded to questions of why, and to hostile objections. And while he was still wont to speak ex cathedra, as it were, his friends (all of whom later ages insisted on calling disciples) habitually put him on the spot and insisted on asking what exactly he meant by what he was saying.

And it is striking how often Confucius derives the importance of such things as ritual or benevolence by showing how nothing will work for men without these virtues.

What we find little of in Confucius is intellectual elaboration, the microscopic focussing on intellectual issues. Within this area he was greatly surpassed by his follower Mencius (ca. 372-289 BCE). For in the book that bears his name we find many sustained elaborated arguments addressing well-defined intellectual issues such as the question of the intrinsic basic goodness of human nature.

The book Mozi manifestly does problematise in the sense that it frequently argues e contrario, by reductio ad absurdum, that is by assuming the opposite of one's thesis to be true and showing that this leads to contradiction or utterly unacceptable logical consequences.

The systematisation of ethical concepts has been brilliantly exhibited in Graham 1978.[24] The tendency towards systematisation of the

[24] See also Harbsmeier (1998), 326ff.

whole field of basic wisdom is most clearly in evidence in books like the Xunzi (third century BCE). A much less systemic attention to the overall organisation of knowledge is in evidence in the Spring and Autumn Annals of Mr Lü.[25] But this belongs perhaps more properly to the realm of epistemology to which we shall turn presently.

Systematisation in the case of philosophy included an interest in the history of the discipline itself, which is evident in the last chapter of the Zhuangzi, the chapter Against the Twelve Masters in the Xunzi, and Sima Tan's all-important treatise on the Six Schools in the Hanshu.[26] Note that the history of the discipline of historiography itself was made the special subject of the Comprehensive Discussion of Histories by Liu Zhiji (661-721)—a very long time before anything of the sort was systematised in the West.

One may argue about the precise nature of the sustained forms of philosophical relativism advocated in the various parts of the book Zhuangzi, but the general comparatist conclusion must be that relativist positions of various kinds play an important part in that book. All general philosophical perspectives are regarded as irretrievably subjective and arbitrary. In particular they are considered to be of indifferent value because they share this character of contingently conditioned subjectivity.

Deliberate public deviance from a general public consensus was common, notable already in Analects 18.6, and notably celebrated throughout the ages in the book bearing the name of one of the deviators, Zhuangzi. Openly favouring one's private interests, in ancient China, was not only thinkable, it was said to be defiantly advocated by Yang Zhu, and even kinship ties, the crucial glue that held the state and its leading clans together, was defiantly devalued on rational grounds by the Mohists. Both these cases of public deviance, and the assertion of the crucial importance of the private sphere, were decried as disastrously common by Mencius (3B9): "Their words fill all under heaven!". The fact that official sources found in the later imperial archives do not stress such deviance, tells much about imperial book collection and little about dissent in writing.

However, whereas many Greeks from Herodotus onwards came to place themselves in the context of surrounding cultures as sources

[25] See Knoblock and Riegel (2001).
[26] See Watson (1958), 43ff.

of inspiration, there is no such perception in China during the first millennium BCE. The case of Pythagoras is both entertaining and instructive: his "Bildungsreisen" are variously reported to have taken him to the Phoenicians, the Chaldaeans, the Persian magicians, the Indian "naked sophists", the Arabs, the Jews, the Gallic druids, and above all the Egyptians.[27] Indeed, among many other things, his philosophical vegetarianism does have striking parallels in many civilisations of the first millennium BCE. Diogenes Laertius, the biographer of Greek philosophers, opens the Prooimion to his great work as follows: "There are some who say that the study of philosophy had its beginning among the barbarians. They urge that the Persians have had their Magi, the Babylonians or Assyrians their Chaldaeans, the Indians their Gymnosophists; and among the Celts and Gauls there are the people called Druids or Holy Ones, for which they cite as authorities the Magicus of Aristotle... ...".[28] The Chinese never nourished any suspicion that their culture was fundamentally derivative from others. Even in modern times, Chinese archaeologists have sometimes found it hard to accept the evidence that what we have come to regard as Chinese culture is the result of an early syncretism of pre-existing cultures.

Epistemology and Encyclopedias

Whereas I take philosophy to be concerned with what is considered and construed as basic in human wisdom, I take epistemology to be concerned in general with what is known and/or knowable. The question what is known is much more commonly asked than the question what is knowable.

All societies have specialists who are known for their knowledge in certain areas, and the division of intellectual labour becomes increasingly important as the field of what is known in any society expands and is diversified. Thus immense specialisation of knowledge as well as skills was needed not only for the building of the pyramids of Egypt, but also for any of the advanced artefacts of a

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[27] See Zeller(1963), vol. 1.1, 384ff, and also Burkert (1972). I wish to acknowledge the profound inspiration I continue to receive from Zeller's work, wherever I consult it, hence the reference to this in some ways outdated nineteenth century work.

[28] Hicks (1958) vol. 1, p. 3.

wide variety of societies. For example, in order to achieve the temperature control needed for the production of Shang dynasty bronzes in the late second millennium BCE there was a comprehensive need for advanced specialised knowledge and skills. There was a need for an advanced bureaucratically organised division of labour.

Regarding China, diversification of intellectual specialisations is evident from Shang times, but none of our sources for the Shang period suggest the sustained elaboration of this knowledge in texts designed to record and further develop such knowledge. The scribal act was primarily an act of recording what was ritually/politically important.

On the other hand, the written elaboration of what is knowable in specialised areas was much in evidence in excavated texts of the third century BCE.[29] The military chapters of the Mozi (third century BCE) as well as the agricultural chapters of the Guanzi (fourth to first century BCE).[30]

Reasoning explanation for the truth of what these sources summarise appear sporadically throughout this literature, but problematisation in the form of a sustained and elaborated consideration of alternative explanation is rare. The default style remains the dogmatic mode, even when explanations are given. However, the systematic problematisation of whatever seems to be believed did occur in the first century BCE in the work of Wang Chong (see Forke (1961)).

The encyclopaedic systematisation of the whole field of what is known and important was notably attempted in the Springs and Autumns of Mr Lü (249 BCE).[31] The Master from Huainan is another such ambitious encyclopaedia organised by a competitor for the imperial position.[32] Both these large works were compiled by bu-

[29] See Harper (1998) 19.

[30] It is important to emphasise that this book appeared hundreds of years after the death of the statesman whose name it bears, and the book is not a good historical source on the views of the statesman. For the books of the military tradition, see Sawyer, R.D. and Mei-Chun Sawyer (1993) and Lau and Ames (1996).

[31] See Knoblock and Riegel (2001). It is significant that Mr Lü is not referred to as "Master Lü" (contrast the Springs and Autumns of Mr Yan). The book does not pose as the intellectual work of the rich and influential politician who organised this enterprise, and who does seem to have given it a definite political direction, Lü Buwei.

[32] The book dates 139 BCE. See Vankeerberghen (2001). It is significant that the title of this book, and none of its variants, refers to the "King of Huainan".

reaucratically organised, more or less politicised intellectuals working for the court of a ruler. In particular, these encyclopaedic systematic works included introductions which reflected on that very systematicity which is our concern. The case is different for the Springs and Autumns Abundant Dew (second to first century BCE).[33] This book does pose as the synthesising work of one author, Dong Zhongshu (195-115 BCE), who was an important intellectual of his time, but the book has a large number of later additions.

Finally, the Records of the Historian (first century BCE).[34] Based on a private family initiative, but compiled in the imperial library, this is an historically organised encyclopaedia of important information about the known world, which encompasses even non-Chinese subjects of all kinds.

The relativisation of all such knowledge, the systematic doubt concerning the reliability of human knowledge is again extensively discussed in the Zhuangzi, and it is not a coincidence that in so many areas this book is our best early source for a high level of reflexivity on any subject. It is as if the Zhuangzi provides a counterpoint. In the matter of knowledge it is clear that Zhuangzi, consciously striving to separate objective and incontrovertible knowledge from other kinds, decided that there was no such thing as incontrovertibly and objectively certain knowledge. The kind of skepticism one finds in the Zhuangzi logically depends on this focus and philosophical emphasis on the separation between incontrovertible and objective knowledge and other less absolutely reliable kinds.

Psychology

The psychological terminological repertoire of human languages may vary widely among different cultures. Some form of distinction between what is inner and outer, however, seems universal in human language. Opinions about the inner life of man must have been current in all civilisations at all times. Psychological discourse was

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Moreover, the King of Huainan nowhere claims authorship of the main treatises in the book the compilation of which he organised.

[33] See Arbuckle (1991), Queen (1996), and also Gassmann (1988).

[34] See Watson (1958). It is significant that whereas the author of this work held the title of a Grand Scribe/Archivist, the conventional and traditional title Shiji simply refers to this simply as "Records of the Scribe".

presumably common in many old civilisations.

The elaboration of the analytic description of the complexities of this inner life raises especially fascinating problems because quite arguably there is a sense in which the creation of a repertoire of psychological concepts partially creates what it purports to describe.

Moreover, the reticence of a culture to record in writing discourse which is concerned with the inner life of man, or with psychology, the absence of a psychological range of vocabulary in any set of ancient sources, says little about the psychological concepts that were operative and important among those people, and in those lives and those societies. It proves nothing about what psychological complexities informed the production of these texts.

For example, the scarcity of psychological vocabulary on the Shang dynasty bones of the late second millennium BCE in China does not entitle us to any far-reaching conclusions on the psychological vocabulary of the times. No more than the absence of words for breaking wind should be used to argue against Shang dynasty flatulence.

However, in the context of the present discussion it remains significant that the psychological vocabulary in Shang dynasty oracle bones is extraordinarily limited, that characters written with the heart radical are exceedingly rare in all these oracle bone texts. Already the bronze inscriptions of the early first millennium BCE the repertoire of psychological terms increases markedly.

However, the written and decontextualised elaboration of the psychological area of knowledge did not occur in the second millennium BCE, but in the middle to late first millennium. The most focussed example of this is in the Xinshu and Neiye chapters of the book Guanzi.[35] There is a certain amount of explanatory reasoning, but I find no traces of sustained problematisation in the form of a detailed consideration of alternative accounts of psychological reality. However, when the philosopher Mencius (fourth century BCE)[36] raises the question of the psychological basis of human morality, his issue is not just argued for and reasoned about: alternative conceptions are taken up in detail.

Within the area of psychology I have found little trace of comprehensive systematisation, and none at all of relativisation of psy-

[35] See Roth (1999).

[36] See Lau (1984), and note that this is the thoroughly revised edition which supersedes and should be used instead of the earlier Penguin version of 1970.

chological theories. Indeed, the focus in psychology remains generally practical and directed towards the use of the mind in moral philosophy, as in the Mencius or in techniques of meditation as in the two Guanzi texts.

The problematisaton of the notion of the soul which we find in the work of Aristotle has no parallel in China.

Ethics

Any civilisation will naturally develop notions of what one should and should not do, and the wisdom literature of the ancient world is replete with moral advice of all sorts.

The decontextualised sustained elaboration of what exactly is good or bad, as opposed to contextual moral advice, certainly did not occur in China before the first millennium BCE. Even in a book like the Springs and Autumns of Master Yan (third century BCE)[37] the moral stance of the philosopher is always strictly embedded in historical context. Abstract discourse is always directly occasioned by the embedding historical/narrative context. Confucius may not have liked to talk about goodness and benevolence, but the record shows that he was often asked about this topic and quite ready to discuss and provide general definitions. However, these definitions, it turns out, tended to be intended for a particular audience in a particular situation. The question was not normally what one should do in a particular situation; the question was how a given audience should best understand a moral concept. Decontextualisation was only beginning.

Not so in Mencius, where there is sustained argumentation about moral concepts, and these are reasoned about in an increasingly decontextualised way (Nivison). Alternative ethical systems, like that of Mozi or of the so-called egoist Yang Zhu[38] are explicitly taken up for refutation, and occasionally, opposing ethical views are given elaborated attention. This is something which is notably cultivated in the book Mencius and makes this book philosophical in a very specific western sense.

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[37] See Holzer (1983).
[38] See Graham (1989), 53ff.

In the Xunzi this process of decontextualisation is complete and there is a systematised attention to ethical values, their explanation and precise meaning. There is not, however, much problematisation of ethical values in the sense that there is rarely any doubt of alternative construals of values, alternative ethical orientations, or open-minded problematising ethical agnosticism.

Throughout the first millennium BCE there is a clear movement from ethical conventionalism as pontificating or analytic discourse about what is traditionally regarded as morally good, and towards an ethical discourse in which this tradition is problematised and the philosopher views himself as someone who has to make independent decisions between competing ethical positions.[39]

Ethical relativism was fully developed in Zhuangzi ch. 29, in particular in Zhuangzi's account of the moral principles of the Robber Zhi.[40]

Medicine

Medical practices of some sort or another are current in all societies with which I am familiar, and I assume them to have been present in all early civilisations. The elaboration of medical knowledge in writing, on the other hand, is not something that may be simply assumed to have occurred except where it is observed.

The professionalisation of medical practice is also common in many civilisations, and it is much in evidence by the title yi which in pre-Han Chinese can precede a name exactly as in "Dr" in English. Thus Yi He is literally translatable as Physician He. The characteristic association is that of physicians with shamans (wuyi), and there is every reason to believe in the continuing close association between shamanism, folk religion and medical practice, and in fact the term wuyi would seem to refer not to shamans on the one hand and physicians on the other, but to one group only: the shaman-physicians. (See now Strickmann (2002)).

In Shang times in China, discourse on the aetiology of sickness was common, but the specific vocabulary for diseases was small, and the increase in terminology during the first millennium BCE was striking indeed. The Shang oracle bone inscriptions have one word for

[39] See Roetz (1983).
[40] See Graham (1981). 234ff.

"sickness, disease" and by Late Warring States times there are dozens of (more or less well-defined) distinct terms for diseases of various kinds.

Liang yi, "competent doctors", were in high demand in Warring States Chinese, but the general social status of doctors would appear to have been low, and close to that of a craftsman.[41] Indeed, the association of doctors and craftsmen was idiomatic in the language. But medical practitioners were definitely expected to have *fang shu*, "professional methods".[42]

Early evidence on doctors is anecdotal and does not therefore permit a principled account of medical practice, and even less of the social background of medical practitioners in general. The situation changes with the extraordinarily important recent discovery of fairly extensive medical texts copied around 200 BCE. These testify to an elaborate tradition of written. practically orientated, medical discourse in China at least during the third century BCE, although, significantly, these texts have not entered the mainstream of transmitted literature and were thus unknown to the Chinese until their rediscovery in recent times. Thus in a crucial sense, these texts are not an integral part of the transmitted medical literature of China.[43] Some version of the Yellow Emperor Inner Classic (see—until further notice—the notoriously unreliable Veith (1949) but also Nathan Sivin's article in Loewe (1983)) was clearly present in the Imperial Library shortly after 26 BCE, and was probably compiled during the last two centuries of the first millennium BCE.[44] It is thus clear that during the first millennium BC the elaboration in writing of medical knowledge was considerable, and historically unprecedented in its generalist theoretical orientation.

Moreover, medical discourse definitely involved aetiology, the dogmatic explanation of effects in terms of underlying causes. In this case, it is clear that underlying realities were taken to account for tangible manifest results.

The problematisation of medical explanations, the sustained consideration of alternative medical explanations, is not a preferred mode of medical discourse, which tends to elaborate and explain rather than to argue.

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[41] See Han Fei Zi ch. 43.
[42] See Weighing Discourses in the Balance ch. 43, translated in Forke (1962).
[43] See Harper (1998).
[44] Harper (1998), 4, note 2.

On the other hand, there is a manifest attempt in the Yellow Emperor Inner Classic to systematise and to give as comprehensive an account of matters medical as current medical knowledge permitted. Thus the Yellow Emperor Inner Classic does not just in an incidental fashion, provide a great deal of medical observation, explanation, and advice: it is designed and compiled to give comprehensive advice. At this stage, unfortunately, it is not easy to be sure at which stage of the compilation of the Yellow Emperor Inner Classic this ambition towards systematicity became dominant. But a probable date is the first century BCE.[45]

The relativisation of the medical explanations and practices recommended in the Yellow Emperor Inner Classic is not part of the purpose of that book.[46]

Divination

Various forms of divination are endemic in many early civilisations. The vast number of divination records that have come down to us from the Shang dynasty bear very detailed witness to divinatory practice from the twelfth century onwards. The proliferation of these records is indeed remarkable, and there is a fairly coherent and constant format which gives these divination records a highly predictable and almost professional appearance.

Occasionally, these divination records do get narratively elaborate, and they can be quite long.

Explanations, on the other hand, are rare on the Shang oracle bones, and problematisation in the sense of comparison between competing explanations seems absent.

The Book of Changes[47] presents a very much more complicated and richer picture. Here we find remarkably disciplined elaboration of the contents of divination, persistent explanation of problematic

[45] Systematic medical botany, with its The Divine Husbandman's Classic of Materia Medica which describes 365 drugs, probably came together a hundred years later. See Sivin and Lloyd (2002), 232 for a fascinating excerpt of this work.

[46] For a singularly ambitious social survey of ancient Chinese and Greek medicine in a comparative perspective see Sivin and Lloyd (2002). Much of this paper is a reaction to this comparative work by two eminent masters of the field.

[47] See Lynn (1994) and Shaughnessy (1996) the latter dealing with newly discovered documents.

points, constant problematisation of what has been said, in the appendices to the book a metaphysical systematisation of the significance of divinatory practices. And in the commentarial tradition to the early parts of book we find a great deal of problematisation of all kinds.

In the tradition of the Book of Changes, Yang Xiong's Canon of Supreme Mystery (ca. 4 BCE)[48] deserves mention because in fact it breaks out of the scheme I have laid out: written in the style of the Book of Changes it problematises and comments on the whole tradition by writing creatively in this deliberately mystifying style. In its own way this is an unparalleled literary cum intellectual breakthrough in the late first millennium BCE, a kind of meta-literature which avoids parody.

Philology

Among all literate people I assume that questions concerning the meanings of words and passages in inscriptions and texts, and the nature of documents themselves are commonly considered. Written texts have often been the focus of some attention wherever they were used.

The written elaboration of such discourse about words and texts, on the other hand, is not something that is necessarily universal. Thus, as far as I know, the Shang oracle bone texts of the late second millennium contain no metalinguistic comments. No bone speculates about another bone, and no bone speculates about its own text.

During the first millennium this reflexive loop, this mode of written discourse where the subject of discourse is again discourse, came to play an important part in Chinese intellectual history.

For Confucius, for example the ancient songs were not only a source for useful elegant quotations. They were also a subject of speculation and playful allusion with regard to their meaning. The meanings of words were currently discussed from the time of Confucius onwards. And there certainly are clear signs of elaboration of the contents of such Chinese keywords as those for "ritual" or for "kind-heartedness/goodness".

The explanation why something means what it appears to mean

[48] See Nylan (1993).

is consummately cultivated, with pervasive and often incisive attention to logic and argumentation, in the Gongyang and Guliang commentaries to the Spring and Autumn Annals which probably date to the third and second centuries.[49]

Problematisation of an explanation given, on the other hand, was rare: by and large the Gongyang and Guliang commentaries present their interpretations and do not discuss in detail any dissent.

Several chapters in the Han Fei Zi (second century BCE[50]—the author Han Fei is never referred to as Master Han Fei in ancient sources) are highly philosophical commentaries, and the Explaining Lao chapter of this book is full of subtle conceptual analysis as well as profound philosophical reflection on text. Thus Han Fei raises philology to the level of a philosophical discipline.

Systematisation of the discourse about words, particularly the glosses, on the other hand, was elaborately present in the Erya dictionary which lists synonym groups on a large, even comprehensive scale. In this work we find an overall systemic metalinguistic interest defining a major scholarly effort. Monolingual dictionaries have varied and cultivated this interest ever since.

Now writing dictionaries of one's own language is not a self-evident practice, and word-lists were made in Mesopotamia long before the Axial Age. But in China, lexicography started out in the third century BCE, and reached an extraordinary peak of systematicity in the Shuowenjiezi submitted to the emperor of the Han in CE 100.[51]

Bureaucratic systematicity also found other objects of comprehensive listing and intelligent subclassification: this was in the area of comprehensive bibliography from the first century BCE onwards. Thus in the years after 26 BCE, an annotated detailed subclassified catalogue of books in the imperial library was compiled and chapter 23 of the official Book of the Han contains a successor to this catalogue which remains a precious source and the starting point of all ancient bibliography to this day.[52]

It is one thing to have many books, to establish libraries, and to consult books in libraries. It is another to reflect on the fact that there

[49] See Malmqvist (1971ff). It is significant that, like the Zuozhuan, neither of these texts refer, in their title, to any "Master" as their author.

[50] See Harbsmeier (in print).

[51] See Bottéro (1996).

[52] See Tsien (1962).

are all these books and to arrange them systematically into natural and informative groups or categories. And it was this latter reflective mode that developed to a considerable degree of perfection in the first millennium BCE. In Shang times, late in the second millennium, masses of documents were indeed collected, which is why so many of them were found together. But there is no evidence that these oracle bones were classified in a way to categorise them.

Grammar

I assume that all adults would notice when their children made grammatical mistakes. It is not self-evident that all peoples would correct their children's grammar, but an awareness of the fact that some sentences are acceptable and others are not I take to be probably universal. This is not to say that the enforcement of correct grammar through some kind of schooling was common. It only means that a distinction between acceptable and unacceptable sentences was probably commonly felt in many cultures and may have been focussed, occasionally.

Elaborating, in writing, rules of one's own grammar, on the other hand, is not a self-evident thing to do. The Indian tradition is quite unique in its explosively sophisticated attention to Sanskrit grammar from the fifth century BCE onwards.

Chinese interest in grammar was largely limited to the lexicography of grammatical particles. The first grammar one might put alongside the early Indian grammars for comparison was produced in 1898 by a student of Latin, Ma Jianzhong.[53]

In this area, there was nothing remotely reminiscent of a grammatical breakthrough in the first millennium. The commentarial philological literature, though, has been shown to have paid consistent attention, en passant, to grammatical questions. This has been particularly brought out in the little-noticed detailed work of Sun Liangming of Shandong University.

[53] See Stammerjohann (1996).

Poetics

The folklore of most peoples includes folk poetry. Many cultures cultivate various forms of court poetry which is more or less distantly related to folklore. The systematic subclassified collection of folk song texts as well as court poetry scripts is not a self-evident undertaking, and the creation of systematic anthologies is a significant act in the literary development of any country, and this occurred around the middle of the first millennium BCE.[54] The elaboration of such poetry, and the use of the poetic medium for a rhetorical pose of personal expression of feelings by a named individual is arguably present in the opening poem of the Songs of the South which may date about the third century BCE. The Songs of the South are in any case another systematised anthology which compiled in Han times and contains much earlier material. (See Hawkes (1985)). The systematisation reached new systematic heights in the Selection from Literature of the sixth century CE. (See Knechtges (1982ff).

The problematisation of literature, the reflexive discourse on literature is clearly evident from the middle of the first millennium. Zhuangzi ch. 27 (see Watson 1968) is largely devoted to discourse about literature. And as a crucial early example of poetic-theory discourse one must mention the famous Mao Introduction to the Book of Odes.[55]

Rhetoric

Anyone who speaks conforms to rules of grammar, whether he knows these or not. Yet, very few peoples have wanted to know very much at all about these rules of grammar. Similarly, anyone who speaks follows patterns of rhetoric, employs rhetorical devices. Very few peoples have wanted to know very much about these rhetorical devices.

However, whereas complex grammar has nothing to do with the complexity of a culture using this grammar, I would like to argue that a whole range of features of rhetoric are in complicated ways linked to advanced cultures. One can be tempted to regard the

[54] See Karlgren (1941).
[55] See the remarkably rich Owen (1992), 37ff.

development of such rhetorical forms as breakthroughs in the context of the present paper.

Consider now for a moment the Greek and Roman rhetorical tradition in the first millennium BCE. Aristotle's Rhetoric, Cicero's rhetorical writings, and the Rhetoric ad Herennium show a type of well-defined reflexivity which one might look for in any culture.

In China, during the first millennium BCE one looks in vain for the elaboration of any reflexive rhetorical analysis of the rhetorical devices used in texts.

However, when one considers not rhetorical reflection, but rhetorical practice, the first millennium was rich in decisive breakthroughs which defined the articulatory course of Chinese literary and intellectual history. The first extensive discussion of rhetoric in ancient China dates from the first century CE.[56]

Concluding Remarks

As Leibniz knew, everything is ultimately connected with everything else. I should have told an infinitely more complex story than I have. But I have chosen an analytic rather than a narrative approach to the striking breakthroughs in China during the axial millennium. And I have focussed on selected features that I consider important in intellectual history.

As I have long argued, the limitation to the first millennium BCE is arbitrary: the decisive break occurred in China, and with remarkable simultaneity in the West, during the first millennium CE, when Buddhism in China and Christianity in the West profoundly changed the intellectual and cultural landscape. Thus, the relevant period in China is the pre-Buddhist period, and what I have surveyed are pre-Buddhist developments of which more occurred in the first two centuries CE.

A few final general remarks on the nature of breakthroughs are in order. In all areas of intellectual history as well as art history, progress remarkably often turns out to be eruptive rather than gradual. Thus bronze technology reached astonishing heights in the

[56] See Forke (1962) vol. 1, p. 64ff. Unger 1994 exemplifies rhetorical devices, and for a survey of the relevant literature on Chinese rhetoric see Harbsmeier (1999 and 2001).

late second millennium BCE, and it is hard to find more advanced bronzes during the succeeding 3,000 years of bronze technology. Similarly, intellectual developments in Greece during the brief period from Socrates to Theophrast, arguably, showed greater and more radical methodological and logical progress than the succeeding 1,000 years, perhaps even 2,000 years. So striking has been this impact of Socrates and the first few generations of his admirers, that intellectual historians have long tended to overlook the remarkable richness and significance and creativity of the later Hellenistic and medieval periods which did have their specific strengths.[57] To Thomas Aquinas, the word "Philosophus" referred to Aristotle, and never to Marcus Aurelius, in spite of the fact that Marcus Aurelius and Epictetus were much closer to Christian philosophical concerns.[58]

I believe there is a good reason for the traditional intellectual obsession with Socrates, Plato and Aristotle of the Axial Age: this has to do with the very foundations of the history of the non-technological sciences:

1. The logic of conceptual analysis in Socrates.
2. The practical and dramatised logic of critical reasoned argumentation in Plato.
3. The logic of general scientific inquiry, and the reflexive focus on logic as a discipline in Aristotle.

Stoic logicians, roughly contemporary with Aristotle—and incidentially much more advanced in most ways than Aristotle himself—were largely neglected until the seminal work by Benson Mates.[59]

Discussing classicism in Europe and in the West, as in China, I believe, must involve a proper understanding of the logical and conceptual underpinnings of this preoccupation of the later tradition with that short classical period during the Axial Age. And without arguing this point here in any detail I want to suggest that in the case of the West, these underpinnings have a great deal to do with the logic of scientific enquiry. Logic is crucial not only for the history of philosophy, but also for the history of science more generally.

It is one thing to register the fact that the later Chinese tradition

[57] A striking example of this is Zeller (1961).
[58] See Dacier (1691), 1-24.
[59] Mates (1953) quietly and magisterially demonstrated the status of the Stoics in the history of logic.

remained extraordinarily preoccupied with the latter half of the axial millennium, so much so that for a long time the study of classical Chinese was defined as the study of the Axial Age. The matter is usefully illustrated by an anecdote the truth of which is confirmed. When Denis Twitchett announced to Gustav Haloun, then professor of Chinese in Cambridge, in his characteristic London accent: "I'm thinking of doing the Taeng!", Haloun replied in his even stronger Bohemian-Teutonic English: "Tang iss jeurnalissm!" Studying the latter half of the first millennium CE, in mid-twentieth century, could still be derided as "journalism".

Times have changed. The vitality of the third century CE, the extraordinary technical and intellectual prowess of the specialists in the foundational science of logic of the seventh century CE, not to speak of those a little more practically orientated astronomers and technologists of all kinds whose contributions were first explored in the path-breaking volumes of Science and Civilisation in China, are now being explored in so much greater detail in a huge number of monographs all over the world. Axial Age studies have in turn become quite marginalised, and the question whether the Axial Age might have a privileged claim to the attention of sinologists has turned out to be politically incorrect.

To answer this question, defiantly, one needs to ask what it was in the literary products of this Axial Age that seemed to justify such a disproportionate emphasis.

Thus there is this second question. This does not concern Chinese perceptions of the importance of the Axial Age. It concerns our own historical and critical analysis of this importance, which is a very different matter. The question, then, is no longer the narrative one: why and how did the Chinese feel the developments and the texts of the Axial Age were so important? The analytic question becomes: why did these developments and these texts receive such extraordinary sustained attention throughout pre-modern and post-axial Chinese history in the first place,—and did they deserve it? It is to *this* unfashionable question, which aims at (perhaps impossible) objective historical and critical analysis rather than narrative description of the sociology of Chinese intellectual history, that I have addressed these untimely considerations from a bird's eye perspective. By philological methods we need to ascertain how the ancient Chinese understood their own intellectual and scientific practices, but then I insist we must go on to ask the old-fashioned analytic

question how these practices should be properly analysed and understood in their historical comparative context. After all, we are prone to misunderstand and even more to misconstrue what we are doing.

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THE MING-QING TRANSITION: SEVENTEENTH-CENTURY CRISIS OR AXIAL BREAKTHROUGH?

FREDERIC WAKEMAN JR.

Until quite recently, the Manchu conquest of China between 1615 and 1684 has been positioned within a more general seventeenth-century crisis associated with global climatic cycles, national demographic fluctuations, and the systemic decline of the Ming (1368-1644) imperial administration.[1] Although the Manchu Qing dynasty (1644-1911) led China to a swifter recovery from the crisis compared to most other parts of the world, conventional historiography would have it that the price of imperial restoration was the curtailment of late Ming developments that might otherwise have helped the Chinese defend themselves against the West and Japan two centuries later.[2]

This familiar narrative has lately been challenged by historians who choose to emphasize continuities between the Ming and the Qing, rather than speak of a mid-seventeenth-century sharp break, or caesura, when the Manchus' banner-men rode across the Great Wall and established their own dynasty. These scholars discover the origins of Qing textual study and "abortive" empiricism as far back as the Song (960-1126); and they stress the ways in which Ming philosophy gave way quite naturally to Qing philology, and academic seventeenth-century Statecraft (*jingshi*) thought foreshadowed and then evolved into radical nineteenth-century New Text (*jinwen*) Confucianism.

Should there be a third way of viewing this transformation? Let us consider here two further points, first, that in Confucian teachings there is a lasting strain between the immanent and the tran-

[1] Wakeman (1986), 1-26; Atwell (1986), 223-244; Adshead (1973), 271-280.
[2] Wakeman (1985).

scendent, between humaneness (*ren*) and ritual (*li*). And, second, as the late Benjamin Schwartz put it, "[i]f there is some common underlying impulse in all these 'axial' movements, it might be called the strain towards transcendence, […] a kind of standing back and looking beyond, […] a kind of critical reflective questioning of the actual and a new vision of what lies beyond."[3] Karl Jaspers' original "Axial Age" had to do "with the emergence, conceptualization, and institutionalization of a basic tension between the transcendental and mundane orders."[4] Once the conception of a basic tension between the transcendental and the mundane order was fully recognized and institutionalized into society, or at least within its center, any definition and resolution of this tension became in itself very problematic. Proposed solutions usually contained strongly heterogeneous and even contradictory elements, and their elaboration into fully articulated terms generated the possibility of different emphases, directions, and interpretations, all of which have been reinforced by the historical existence of multiple visions that different groups advocated.[5]

This contest between the divine and the mundane could also appear as a tension between intuitive monism and rational dualism in the Confucian renaissance of twelfth-century *Song Daoxue* (Learning of the Way), in which case seventeenth-century Ming-Qing China might have been the site of an axial breakthrough (both epistemological and ontological) that reconfigured the whole social context of knowledge.[6] The remainder of this paper is devoted to examining this claim through a number of key concepts deployed by Gu Yanwu (1613-1682) and Huang Zongxi (1610-1693), two prominently reflexive Ming-Qing thinkers.[7]

The Seventeenth-Century Crisis

The dimensions of this crisis are well known and are, therefore, only schematically sketched below. At the most fundamental level, the

[3] Schwartz (1975), 295.
[4] Eisenstadt (1982), 294.
[5] Ibid., 294.
[6] In general, see, Eisenstadt (1986), 291-324. But also, Elvin (1986), 359; and for a typological perspective, see the introduction to this volume.
[7] For this claim, see de Bary (1958), 163.

climate of the globe cooled throughout the middle 1600s and colder temperatures brought earlier winters than usual to moderate climes. During this so-called "Maunder Minimum", rivers and lakes throughout central China froze over, and the numbers of the days used per year to grow and harvest crops were significantly reduced. Famines ensued as a result, and along with famines came plagues, especially smallpox, that afflicted the northern part of the country in particular. Lack of grain supplies also led the Jurchen tribes of the Northeast (that is, the Manchus) to engage in ever-expanding raids into Korea and across the Great Wall in search of booty, tribute, and slaves.

Meanwhile, the Ming empire's increasing reliance on American silver imports, although fuelling the economy during the great burst of commercialization (which began in the late sixteenth century, attracting farmers in the rice-rich lower Yangzi Valley away from subsistence agriculture into cash-cropping), rendered the country vulnerable to monetary devaluation and a dearth of food supplies in the middle 1600s.[8] When this was exacerbated by fiscal factors such as rampant tax evasion, the social and economic infrastructure of the Ming began to crumble.[9] More and more "free" tenants commended themselves as serfs to the landholding gentry whose lands were kept off of the tax rolls. Irrigation systems silted over, canals were left undredged, the great river-dikes fell into disrepair. Deficits accumulated, while the top-heavy Ming royal aristocracy grew more and more parasitic.

As grain shipments to the military colonies located along and just outside the Great Wall diminished, the state system of hereditary military conscription faltered. Army registers were padded, regional generals formed their own loyal legions, and frontier officers defected to the Manchus. Even the quasi-military government postal system had to be shut down, and its couriers became mounted bandits and rebels who claimed huge portions of the northern and western regions of the Ming empire.

At the same time, the Ming scholar-official elite fractionalized. Philosophically, there had been a long-standing division between orthodox Cheng-Zhu Neo-Confucianists and the intuitionists of

[8] But see, von Glahn, (1996), 246-247; Goldstone (1988), 103-142; Cartier (1981), 454-466.

[9] Flynn (1986), part 1; 37-60.

Wang Yangming's ideational school. The former, the School of Principle (Li xue), stressed the investigation of "things" (by which they mainly meant texts), strict moral self-cultivation, and the division between higher-order intellectual pursuits and lesser materialistic impulses. In popular terms, this generally dualist schema translated as the mind's control over the body by "controlling desires." The latter, the School of Heart-Mind (Xin xue) was a complex assemblage of beliefs that centered upon the importance of spontaneity, intuitive moral conscience, and the unity of thought and action.[10] In its most radical form, proponents of the Taizhou School of Heart-and-Mind preached a kind of ethical populism, according to which the streets were "filled with sages" and Everyman could attain enlightenment. The more orthodox School of the Learning of the Way associated with the Song-period Cheng brothers and Zhu Xi was rather more élitist and gradualist. One did not find moral truth merely by looking inside one's self. One discovered the moral principles of life by arduous ethical self-cultivation and through many years of classical study.

This intellectual division was reflected, though not mirrored, in the political struggles of the early 1600s. Local academies (*shuyuan*), whose members lectured on ethics and the classics, were divided along roughly doctrinal lines, and competed with each other for political influence through court factions and through the successful placement of their own members in bureaucratic positions via the civil service examination system.[11] Some of these academies evolved into large political confederations (e.g., the Donglin Academy, the Restoration Society), that supported one Grand Secretary against another by allying themselves with eunuchs at court who sought special advantages of their own. Over time, all aspects of imperial policy were affected by this ruinous factionalism, including the selection of strategies to deal with the Manchus whose strength continued to grow outside the Great Wall.

The Manchu Conquest and the Imposition of Orthodoxy

Most contemporary scholars regard the Manchu conquest basically as a reconstruction of the imperial administration of the Ming. This

[10] For the late Ming stress on emotion (*qing*), see Kutcher (1999), 47-48.
[11] von Glahn (1991), 280-307.

process, however, was both hindered and furthered by the ethnic separateness of the Qing regime. It was hindered as a result of southern Chinese resistance to Manchu policies that imposed symbolic uniformity in personal styles of dress and adornment; while it was furthered by the introduction of new institutions of rule that accompanied a novel form of universal Confucian-Buddhist kingship and a hybrid configuration of Sino-Manchu administrative dyarchy.[12] These formulas were remarkably successful—so successful, in fact, that China was the first among the world's major monarchies to recover from the seventeenth-century crisis during the 1670s and early 1680s.

Yet, to Han nationalist revolutionaries at the turn of the twentieth century, the price of this recovery was the Manchus' devious imposition of a stultifying orthodoxy that hearkened back to the Neo-Confucian masters of the Northern Song, such as Cheng Yi, Cheng Hao, and Zhu Xi. After their conquest of North China, the Manchus were quick to reconstitute the civil service exam system (which initially gave them an opportunity to manipulate quotas favoring Manchus and northern Chinese collaborators over more highly educated southerners). At the same time, they were just as quick in confining the empire's educational centers—and especially the academies of the lower Yangzi region—to curricula of rote preparation for the examinations, while explicitly forbidding the discussion of political and ethical issues that went beyond the study of the classics to involve matters of public concern and imperial rule.[13]

Still according to these later revolutionary critics (who were mustering their own ideological forces for an assault on the Qing dynasty at the beginning of the twentieth century), this confinement went hand-in-hand with an attack upon the "excesses" of Ming intuitive philosophy, and especially of the Taizhou radicalism of the Wang Yangming School. Although Wang's powerful philosophy of activism flourished in Japan as Oyōmei Learning inspiring many of the *shishi* (knights of resolve) of the Meiji Restoration, it was completely obscured, even buried, in Qing China. In the sages' Hall of Great Completion in Qufu, Wang Yangming's canonized tablet was replaced by others of a lesser, safer sort, which adhered to the School

[12] For Qing notions of universal kingship, see Crossley (1999), 221-280.

[13] For a devastating critique of the examination system, see Huang Zongxi's attack in de Bary (1993), 111-121.

of Principle rather than to the School of Heart-Mind.

Modern intellectual historians have questioned this doctrinal demonization of Ming intuitionism by Qing rulers, and especially the Kangxi Emperor (r. 1662-1722). They point out that, quite apart from imperial policy, the teachings of Wang Yangming (1472-1529) were already being called into serious question by the latter years of the Ming, and that it was the majority of *literati* themselves who promoted Cheng-Zhu Confucianism over Wang Yangming's idealism. Nonetheless, the Qing dynasty is still closely identified with the call for a return to basic moral principles; with a markedly rigid rejection of the freewheeling social mores of the late Ming; with the repression of affective emotional spontaneity; and with the favoring of a much more dour and ascetic emphasis upon ritual and obligation. In this regard there is no question, for example, that women were restrained to the inner quarters of elite households more than ever, that female literacy was discouraged, that homosexuality was treated as a deviant social disorder, and that male martiality was exalted over mere Confucian literacy.

Yet Confucianism as a scholarly pursuit did not suffer in the least under the Qing state. For, according to a second bill of attainder directed by anti-Manchu revolutionaries against the regime, the Qing dynasty had deliberately fostered a spirit of scholasticism, diverting otherwise politically engaged *literati* into massive lexicography and encyclopedia projects, while openly encouraging an intellectual industry of textual analysis, philological evaluation, and historical linguistics.

The Continuity of Intellectualism

Although the High Qing impulse toward intellectualism was attributed by nationalist revolutionaries to Manchu design, contemporary scholars, such as Ying-shih Yü, have traced it back to the Song period, whence it steadily developed through the Ming, culminating in the empiricism of the so-called School of Han Learning during the High Qing.[14] By intellectualism, historians invoke the name of Dai Zhen (1723-1777), seeking to identify in the "Great Master of Investigations-Based-on-Evidence" the High Qing tendency to turn

[14] Yü (1976), passim.

to textual authorities—and not moral conscience or ethical revelation—for guidance and instruction.[15] Identified with the School of Principle, late imperial intellectualism is thus set against the intuitive moral initiative of the School of Heart-Mind which claimed to have discovered ethical certainty in one's own self. As this more spontaneous and self-centered idealism developed through the teachings of Wang Yangming, it blended immanence and transcendence in a cosmic moral vision, which, in its most radical embodiments, defied secular, hierarchical, and scholastic criteria confirmed by classical ritual texts and conventional teachings. Paradoxically it also engendered the materialism ("principle depends upon material force; when material force is strong, principle prevails") of Wang Fuzhi (1619-1692):

> At bottom, principle is not a finished product that can be grasped. It is invisible. The details and order of material force are principle that is visible. Therefore, the first time there is any principle is when it is seen in material force. After principles have thus been found, they of course appear to become tendencies. We see principle in the necessary aspects of tendencies.[16]

Yet, while some scholars have associated the rejection of Wang Yangming's idealistic moral vision with a backlash against the "laxness" of mores that seemed to have brought about the fall of the lamented Ming dynasty, Ying-shih Yü has preferred a less dramatic explanation. In his view, Qing academicism is connected to a centuries-long trend towards "bookish" learning and evidentiary explication, that can be traced back to Zhu Xi and the Masters of the Northern Song.[17]

A similar stress on the connection between Ming and Qing currents of thought characterizes the approach to Chinese intellectual history taken by Benjamin Elman. Whether describing the eighteenth-century stress on philology, or the rise of New Text Confucianism in the nineteenth century, Elman emphasizes the linkages between late Ming philosophy and High Qing empirical studies as well as the continuity of Chinese intellectual history from the Statecraft loyalists of the mid-1600s to the Gongyang commentators of the late Qianlong years and ensuing New Text (*jinwen*) revivalists of

[15] Chan, (1963), 709.
[16] Wang (1963a), 698. See also Black (1989), passim.
[17] Yü, passim.

the 1800s.[18] To be sure, sometimes the link is faint; but there are enough common threads running through the entire fabric to make a continuity thesis plausible. At the same time, by smoothing out the rift between late Ming and early Qing, Yü and Elman's weft removes any possibility of a lasting transvaluation in the direction of an axial breakthrough.

Gu Yanwu

We are faced with an entirely different prospect, however, when we read Gu Yanwu afresh. A genuine seventeenth-century polymath, whose erudition was almost unmatchable, Gu left a set of learned reflections, *What I Have Learned from Day to Day (Rizhi lu),* that were much more than simple reading notes and textual jottings. These scholarly musings, plus a series of additional essays written during the Ming-Qing transition, helped make Gu the intellectual ancestor of the Statecraft reformers of the nineteenth century.

For our purposes, we should direct our attention to four primary aspects of Gu Yanwu's writings: his demystification of the classics, his historicism, his emphasis upon asceticism, and his hopes to restore "feudalism" within the confines of the "prefecturalism" created since the Qin-Han establishment of a centralized empire.

1. *Demystification*

Gu's demystification of the classics, and especially of the most cosmic of canonical texts, the oracular *Book of Changes* or *Yi*, is intimately connected to his historicization of Confucian hermeneutics. The *Changes* were supposedly derived from the sage Fu Xi's revelation of divine patterns, what became the hexagrams of the *Yi*, by observing the designs of animals' colorings. Instead of positing Fu Xi as a timeless sage, though, Gu Yanwu explained the discovery of the hexagrams by treating him as a historical figure located in time.[19] And although Gu Yanwu did not question divination straightforwardly, he did his best to turn the consultation of the *Yi* into a deductive exercise.

There are, he wrote, two possible uses for the *Changes*. One is to

[18] Elman (1984); and (1990).
[19] Gu (1983a) 1.1, 1-2.

"determine the past, which is as it should be": that is, to look at the underlying thread of the traces, the records, of men's actions, which are *shun* (in accordance) with the pattern of events. The other is to "know future events, which is refractory" (*ni*, which means both to foretell the future and to rebel). Gu did not challenge the sages' ability to "divine" (*shi*) the latter, but argued that this ability was based upon the capacity to isolate the "traces" (*ji*) of human conduct. Hence, divination was the perception of regularities in change and not just fortune-telling. Trying his best to purge Confucian thought of its flaccid text-mixing and mysticism, Gu sought to secularize the *Changes* by turning it into an instrument, a mirror, with which to observe the past.[20] The following passage is indicative of this.

> The gentleman considers what is to be done and how he is to behave, and asks [the oracle] about it. The answer, his acceptance of fate, is like a guideline for him: it tells him how to act and how to behave. Life and death are ordained; wealth and honor are [settled] in Heaven. But if this is entirely true, then *nothing* can be done, *nothing* can be actually carried out. Therefore, one should not inquire [of the oracle] at all. And if one should ask, then he would not be answered anyway. The *Changes* display the activities of men who went before. These are not ways of knowing what goes before men. To seek to know the future is not the Way of the sages.[21]

That same spirit of secular demystification can also be found in Gu's conviction that people only appeal to the spirits and join sectarian movements when mundane rulership and social civility fail them. Describing the conditions of his own time, he wrote:

> When the country is chaotic and there is no government, the common people become angered and cannot seek justice. Oppressed, they see no rhyme nor reason to things. Their needs must plead their case before the spirits. It is then that sworn alliances begin [...] Nowadays all of the [Daoist] preaching about hell and the [Buddhist] ledgers of merits and demerits are practices left over from the sworn alliances of people who use harsh punishments to control others. If brightness and virtue are not the rule, and if widows and children are left unprotected, then kingly government must be carried out above so that the people will not once again have to beg for help from the spirits below. And so it is said that if it is an age of the Way, then ghosts will not act as

[20] Ibid., 1.1, 23-24.
[21] Ibid., 1.1, 29.

> spirits, which means that the link between heaven and earth is severed. This is as it should be.[22]

2. *Historicization*

Treated as only one among many divining texts of its time, the *Yi*, in this respect, was paradoxically "de-sanctified". Tracing the history of its commentaries, Gu Yanwu clearly demonstrated the vagaries of such a text: that is, how certain portions came to be embodied as a "classic" (*jing*). Yet at the same time, Gu was haunted by a constant fear: that of losing the original text of a classic. In the case of the *Zhou yi*, Gu refused to lump together all the classics, using one to elucidate another. His unflagging intention was to treat each single text on its own terms, rather than as part of a syncretic canon.[23] "Some used other classics to illustrate the themes of this classic; some used other classics to hide the themes of this classic. Thereupon, this classic became an erratic book and the classics themselves were lost."[24]

By Ming times, the orthodox text was accompanied by Zhu Xi's commentary, thanks to the sponsorship of the Hongwu Emperor (r. 1368-1398) and his son, the Yongle Emperor (r. 1403-1424). But imperial imprimaturs notwithstanding, the continuing confusion over commentaries meant that "one cannot completely understand the great *Yi*."[25] The perpetuation of such textual confusion, which embedded the historically contingent in the universally transcendent, prevented the *junzi* (gentleman) from attaining an entirely revealed truth. Or, as another noted seventeenth-century philosopher, Wang Fuzhi, argued in a historicist vein:

> As to setting up schemes or arranging for details neither the *Book of History* nor Confucius said anything about them. Is it because they ignored substance and overlooked details? Probably because the ancient institutions were meant to govern the ancient world and cannot be generally followed today, the superior man does not base his activities on them, and because what is suitable today can govern the

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[22] Ibid., 1.1, 57-58.

[23] "Gu Yanwu makes it clear that ancient texts were primarily tools for understanding and validating transmitted texts; they were historical documents, but of a secondary nature." Brown (2002), 120.

[24] Gu (1983a) 1,1:5.

[25] Ibid.

> world of today but will not necessarily be suitable for the future, the superior man does not hand it down to posterity as a model.[26]

Freezing the text into a single orthodoxy also rigidly stereotyped moral categories into a status hierarchy. Gu Yanwu wrote with respect to the lines of the hexagrams: "Two had to [mean] minister. Five had to [mean] ruler. The *yin* hexagrams had to be spoken of as the small man. The *yang* hexagrams had to refer to the gentleman. Therefore, this classic became a catch-all, and the *Yi* was lost ... The commentary became the host, and the classic itself was the guest."[27]

Did the positions (*wei*) of the lines of the hexagrams after all correspond to social positions, the higher lines referring to the ruler and the lower ones to his ministers?

> If one is speaking of the [ontological] essence (*ti*) of the hexagrams, then we must all refer to these as positions. Consequently, it is said that the six positions [of the six lines of the hexagrams] are realized; or that the six positions of the *Yi* are brought to completion. This being so, then indeed there are positions among the lines of the hexagram. *But these shapes are not derived from the [social status] positions of men.*[28]

Gu thus does not deny the existence of social ranks. What he rejects, are, rather, the analogies made between the hierarchies of human status and essential cosmic relations by removing the ontological underpinnings of the otherwise immutable positions of "upper" and "lower" expressed in the *Yi*—that is, the very underpinnings which the Cheng-Zhu schoolmen used to buttress the existing social and political hierarchies of the isomorphic Confucian family and state.

3. *Intellectual Watchfulness*

Part of Gu Yanwu's cautious critique of orthodox authority was his concern to establish the academic intellectual as the best judge of events. Since the *Changes* tells the gentleman when to act, it puts a powerful weapon in the hands of the *literatus* who recognizes the moment when it is right to intervene with decisiveness. Within the limits imposed by the text itself, which elevates the imperial dragon

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[26] Wang (1963b), 701.
[27] Gu (1983a), 1.1:5.
[28] Ibid., 1.1:7-8. Emphasis added.

to a soaring flight over the rest of us below, Gu was able to posit an alternative to charismatic authority (the founding sage-king) and routine patrimonialism (the ritually maintained emperor) in the figure of the learned gentleman-reader of the classic. For Gu, the *Yi* was not a text to be consulted for revelation. It was a text meant to be read with as much historical and philological knowledge as possible in order to understand its significance as a guide to action.

In that regard, comprehending the fundamental significance of each of the hexagrams of the *Changes* was a "practical" exercise to be studied and learned. As Gu put it, first citing Confucius: "I transmit and do not create" (*shu er bu zuo*): Is not someone who seeks answers from Heaven without studying the ancients like [a farmer] who sows without ploughing?"[29] Yet, this was by no means a frivolous exercise. True to the spirit of the age, it was conducted in a state of this-worldly ascetic watchfulness (*shen*) espoused by his contemporaries Liu Zongzhou and Huang Zongxi. "Even though [the sages'] influence is profound, licentiousness has long been with us. Only if one is troubled enough to [constantly] stand on guard over one's self, can defeat be forestalled."[30]

Maintaining such self-discipline was a difficult task, requiring continuous authentic effort that was neither just ritualistic nor merely bookish. The gentleman's devotion had to go beyond the conventional duties of the official or the scholar.

> If he is engaged in official career studies, then he can neither be truly instructed nor truly fulfilled. For, in order to draw near to the radiance of the Son of Heaven, his actual duties are merely a matter of mastering sacrificial rituals. If he is engaged in scholarship, then he can neither learn the various categories [of knowledge] nor perceive things completely. For, in order to approximate the way of a great scholar, his actual learning is merely a matter of rote recitation.[31]

The motif of this continuous struggle ("its merit is that it is unending"[32]) was to be found in the seventh of the eight diagrams of the *Changes*: *gen* (restraint, mountain). Its central figure was that of the gentleman in the *Analects*, who had "no foregone conclusion, no arbitrary predetermination, no obstinacy, and no egoism." This was

[29] Ibid., 1.1:51.
[30] Ibid., 1.1:10.
[31] Ibid.
[32] Ibid., 1.1:10-11.

the watchman, keeping still, observing affairs at their turning point, ready to bring to completion the struggle ahead. "He turns his back on the mountain and does not look after his self. Riches and noble rank do not tempt him. Poverty and social meanness do not impel him. He does not bow down to martial majesty."[33]

4. *The Spirit of Feudalism*

To Gu Yanwu, this attitude of rugged autonomy corresponded to the spirit of "feudalism" (*fengjian*) he wished to re-introduce into the "prefectural" (*junxian*) system that had prevailed in China since the Qin unification.[34] Gu's attraction to "feudalism" had nothing to do with what we might imagine as the attraction of the medieval panoply. For him, a feudal order was anti-hierarchical, even anti-aristocratic. It corresponded to an ideal of pure simplicity (*shun*), opposed to the ornate (*wen*) practices abetted by sycophantic ministers.

> Before the Xia dynasty, the character [of imperial nomenclature and rule] was pure. Hence the emperors had names (*ming*) but not designations (*hao*). After the Shang, gradually [nomenclature] became more ornate. Hence, there were both names and designations. [Standards of] behavior grew profuse, and even posthumous titles were used to glorify [rulers]. Thereupon Duke Zhou curtailed titles, but still the titles were extended even farther: from the Son of Heaven even unto the nobility. Good and evil alike were all ennobled, and the designations of the ten stems [which were originally used as reign names] were no longer in existence. Thus, before Wang Ji (the father of Wen Wang) titles were not conferred in the manner of the rites of the Shang. This process of adornment was owing to the [so-called] righteousness of ministers. Alas! How can this be what we qualify as [the work of] the sages?[35]

Yet feudalism was more than a matter of ritual address or clothing. One could never go back in time and restore the pure feudal institutions of yore. In Wang Fuzhi's words:

> Neither the *Book of History* nor Confucius talked about the regulations for the feudal system, the "well-field" system, feudal lords' meetings and audience with the emperor, punitive expeditions, the establishment of offices, or the bestowing of emolument. How then dare anyone who is not equal in virtue to sage-emperors Shun and Yü or

[33] Ibid., 1.1:15. For the importance of striving and perseverance, see ibid. 1.1:22.
[34] Yang (1962).
[35] Gu (1983a) 1.1:30.

> Confucius determine the fundamental standards for ten thousand generations with what they have memorized and recited in books?[36]

Though Gu Yanwu had greater faith in the *literati's* ability to reconstruct the past, he did not believe that the administrative system of prefectures and centralized monarchy could be abolished by fiat. What was needed was a healthy dose of feudalism to be administered to the prefectural system as such. Instead of forcing scholar-officials to serve outside their native places, members of the local elite should be encouraged to govern themselves. Public (*gong*) concerns were commendable, and enlightened self-interest (*si*) should be recognized and rewarded. Who could be expected to do a better job of governance: officials brought in from outside for a year or two as county magistrates, or local gentry looking after the best interests of their kinsmen and neighbors responsibly? The dynasty should abolish the "law of avoidance", that prohibited *literati* from serving in their own provinces. It should recognize the legitimacy of the gentry's home-rule, of local elites looking after their own school systems, and the conduct of their own affairs. To be sure, meddlesome and greedy lower members of the gentry—the county-level *shengyuan* or lower degree holders—might try to engage in pettifoggery or tax farming. However, truly respected members of the elite, such as higher degree holders, could look after themselves and their charges best without undue outside interference.[37]

In its own way, Gu Yanwu's espousal of "feudal" self-interest as a recognition of the motive forces of social reality represented a kind of "Machiavellian moment" in Chinese intellectual history. The nineteenth-century School of Statecraft was to base its program of local self-government and practical reform on Gu's notion of enlightened self-interest, along with his championing of *literati* autonomy and what later came to be thought of as "public opinion" (*qingyi*). Meanwhile, though, it found immediate resonance in the political theories of Gu's fellow Ming loyalist, Huang Zongxi.

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[36] Wang (1963b), 701.
[37] Gu (1983b), 1-9.

Huang Zongxi's Proposals for Imperial Reform

In 1677, Gu Yanwu wrote a letter to Huang Zongxi, praising his master work, *the Mingyi daifang lu* (*Waiting for the Dawn: A Plan for the Prince*).[38]

> I read it several times and realized, as a result, that the world is never without true men, that the evils of a hundred kings can be repaired and the glories of the Three Dynasties in time revived [...] The superior man of old wrote with a view to posterity, so that when a worthy king appeared in later times he could learn from it. .... Of this I can feel confident. I have put some of my ideas into a book entitled *What I Have Learned from Day to Day* and now I congratulate myself that the opinions expressed therein agree with six- or seven-tenths of what you have said [in the *Mingyi daifang lu*].[39]

Like Gu, Huang Zongxi argued for greater local autonomy. The primary locus for this form of gentry self-government was to be the prefectural and district school system, vastly expanded in size by the conversion of Buddhist and Daoist temples, monasteries, and nunneries into Confucian academies. Superintended by teachers of the classics selected from the district's "reputable scholars", rather than appointed by the court, these academies were to serve as autonomous social centers symbolizing the distance between center and periphery. And as political forums with some measure of control over regular official magistrates, they would represent the interests of local Confucian elites.[40]

> In the various prefectures and districts, on the first and fifteenth of each month, there should be a great assembly of the local elite, licentiates, and certified students in the locality, at which the school super-

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[38] "*Ming-i* has multiple meanings. Ordinarily, *i* signifies 'peace and order,' and therefore *ming-i* literally suggests that the theme of this book is 'an exposition of [the principles of] good government.' But *ming-i* also means 'brightness obscured' or 'intelligence repressed' and is the title of the thirty-sixth hexagram in the Confucian classic, *Book of Changes (I Ching)*, originally a divination text, which latter attracted much metaphysical and cosmological speculation. The *Ming-i* hexagram is considered to represent a phase in the cosmic cycle, during which the forces of darkness prevail but the virtuous preserve their integrity, hopefully waiting for the power of evil to wane, hence: *Waiting for the Dawn*." De Bary, (1993), 5-6.

[39] Letter from Gu Yanwu to Huang Zongxi concerning the *Mingyi daifang lu*. Transl. in de Bary, (1993), 171.

[40] For the symbolic distinction between center and periphery in typologically axial civilizations, see Eisenstadt (1982), 301.

> intendent should lead the discussion. The prefectural and district magistrates should sit with the students. ... The teacher and his pupils should bring up issues and discuss them together. ... If minor malpractices appear in the administration of a prefectural or district magistrate, it should be the school's duty to correct them.[41]

Huang Zongxi also wished to renew the practice, common in Song times, of having the residents of a district, and especially its *literati* (*shi*), serve *corvée* in rotation as sub-officials under regular county magistrates. Moreover, he recommended establishing functional offices in each district and prefecture that would correspond to the main ministries of the central government. These bureaucratic posts would be "staffed with licentiates from the local schools."[42]

Huang's championing of local academies and elite political involvement was apparently much more oppositionist than Gu Yanwu's appeal to restore the spirit of feudalism within the prefectural system.[43] *Waiting for the Dawn* contained an unstinting attack against autocratic selfishness posited upon the widely shared belief, common to arcadian descriptions in the *Record of Rites*, of a prehistoric benign state of nature. "In the beginning of human life each man lived for himself and looked to his own interests. There was such a thing as the common benefit, yet no one seems to have promoted it; and there was common harm, yet no one seems to have eliminated it." The reign of the sage-kings brought good to all-under-heaven, but these mythic monarchs were eventually succeeded by rulers of a greedy sort, who

> … made it so that no man dared to live for himself or look to his own interests. Thus the prince's great self-interest took the place of the common good of all-under-Heaven. ... He looked upon the world as an enormous estate to be handed on down to his descendants, for their perpetual pleasure and well-being. ...This can only be explained as follows: In ancient times all-under-Heaven were considered the master, and the prince was the tenant. The prince spent his whole life

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[41] Huang Zongxi, transl. in de Bary (1993), 106-107.

[42] Ibid., 163. For the S. Song sub-bureaucracy, see McKnight (1972).

[43] "What the academies have considered right, the court thought must be wrong and therefore frowned upon." Huang cited examples of student protests during the Eastern Han (25-220, when 30,000 scholars held a protest demonstration at the Imperial College) and the Northern Song (960-1127, when students stormed the palace to reinstate a fired minister). Huang Zongxi, transl. in de Bary (1993), 105.

> working for all-under-Heaven. Now the prince is master, and all-under-Heaven are tenants.[44]

Huang Zongxi's intellectual legacy was, thus, a tradition of intellectual dissent that resurfaced during the late nineteenth-century reform movement in the form of student clubs and societies, that inspired the political heroics of intellectuals during the 1930s under the Chiang Kai-shek regime, and was explicitly invoked in the 1960s by dissidents of Mao's dictatorship on the eve of the Cultural Revolution. There was no question by then that Confucian theocracy had been overturned, and that the autocracy of the Party-State had been fundamentally challenged. This was partially the result of the efforts made by seventeenth-century thinkers to de-sacralize imperial rule by severing the link between transcendent cosmic hierarchies and mundane political institutions, while displacing the traditional authority of the center over the periphery with newly fashioned arrangements of ancient "feudal" conventions of classical protest.

But what happened between the 1660s and the 1960s? For which prince, after all, did Huang Zongxi write his revolutionary plan? For decades now, Chinese intellectual historians have fretted over this question. Was Huang—who refused to compromise his own integrity as a Ming loyalist but was willing to seek official favors from the Qing dynasty for his two sons—preparing this political advice for the very Manchus who had overthrown his Chinese masters? Was he, in other words, waiting for some sort of barbarian political dawn? Prevailing opinion has it that Huang Zongxi originally penned *Waiting for the Dawn* during the 1660s in the hope of a Ming restoration, but by the 1680s he was perfectly prepared to have his advice taken by the Qing's Kangxi Emperor (r. 1662-1722). For, to put it simply, precisely because of the seventeenth-century crisis, the Son of Heaven remained the emperor of China: the sole arbiter of political authority and the despotic ruler of the all-under-Heaven.

By the same token, Gu Yanwu's plans to recreate the "spirit of feudalism" did not operate within a genuine feudal order, wherein there would be multiple monarchs for the "gentleman" to pick and choose. In the late empire there was only one political authority to serve, and its institutions, which were among the most bureaucratically sophisticated in the world, could easily afford not to tolerate

[44] Ibid., 92.

the clamor of local elites for a greater voice in government—especially when it was the selfsame local gentry that longed to enroll in the civil service that ruled them all. By the 1670s, Gu, his personal Ming loyalism notwithstanding, was encouraging his own nephew to sit for the Qing capital examinations. His legacy of *literati* dissent was only ceremonially revived during the mid-nineteenth century in the form of a shrine association, whose members shared evenings of wine and poetry under Beijing's winter moon while awaiting news of their appointment as magistrates in some distant outpost of the empire.[45]

If there was after all an axial breakthrough during the Ming-Qing transition, its seventeenth-century eruption was quickly contained by the renascent imperial order. This is not to say that its theoretical impulse towards, on the one hand, a new definition of secular political authority and, on the other, a relocation of governing authority in the hands of self-serving local elites was utterly neutralized. The eruption was simply too weak, rather, to push the matter through to a fundamentally different conclusion. That only happened after the immense shock the canopy of the entire system suffered under the onslaught of the West. Like it or not, it was the demonstrated failure of the larger order—otherwise so resilient and enduring over the centuries—that led to a final explosion. Or, to put it much more constructively, as Gu Yanwu modestly did in his 1677 letter to Huang Zongxi: "As the years and months have gone by, I have delved into the secrets of the past and present. Only so have I learned that `the sea comes last, and the river first'; that to make a mountain requires many baskets of earth."[46]

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[45] Polachek (1992).

[46] Letter from Gu Yanwu to Huang Zongxi concerning the *Mingyi daifang lu*. Transl. in de Bary (1993), 170.

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PART FIVE

CONCLUDING REFLECTIONS

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AXIAL CIVILIZATIONS AND THE AXIAL AGE RECONSIDERED

S.N. EISENSTADT

Introduction

The discussions at the Florence conference call for reconsideration of important problematics inherent to the analysis of axial civilizations. The common denominator of these reconsiderations is an attempt to develop a much more differential and contextualized analysis of the relation between non-axial civilizations, axial civilizations and world history. Instead of assuming that the crystallization of axial civilizations entailed the emergence of a distinct, more or less uniform world-wide (or at least Eurasian) Axial Age (or a distinctive axial stage in world history), it is better to conceive the axial complex as an important—indeed a very crucial—component in the history of human societies which developed in different ways and contexts, giving rise to different, multiple axialities which interacted continually among themselves and with non-axial civilizations in the shaping of different patterns of world history or histories. All these considerations call for a more differentiated approach to the relationship between civilizational constellations and world histories, and bear closely on the relations between sociological theory and comparative historical analysis.

In greater detail, the most important points to be reconsidered are the following:

First is the importance of distinguishing between the "chronological" aspects of Axial Age civilizations, and the "typological" ones, a distinction which calls for a more critical approach to the conception of an Axial Age.

Second is the emphasis on the importance of a more differentiated approach to pre-axial or non-axial civilizations—such as for instance the Assyrian, Babylonian, Egyptian and Achaemenid; many South Asian civilizations, and of course Japan—so as not to use this

term as a sort of general residual category. It is important to analyze these civilizations, their reproduction and dynamics in their own terms and not only as precursors of axial civilizations or as "failed" axialities.

Third is the necessity to distinguish systematically, to a far greater extent than we have, among the different components of axial civilizations: basic cultural orientations, cosmological visions, and institutional formations, with special emphasis on the development within them of multiple constellations of power, collective identities and economic formations.

Fourth, and closely connected with the preceding consideration, is the recognition of the importance of the autonomous dynamics of political spheres, the constitution of collective identities as well as of economic formations; of the different modes in which they were interwoven with different axial cosmological visions, giving rise to different institutional patterns without assuming the existence of a natural correlation between any specific cosmological vision and any specific political regime, patterns of collective identity or economic formation.

Fifth is an emphasis on the importance of historical contingencies in the crystallization of such patterns.

Sixth is the recognition of the importance of intercivilizational contacts and of the impact of broader intercivilizational frameworks in the shaping of different institutional patterns, non-axial and axial alike. In this context, the significance of the Mongol invasion—i.e. an invasion by a "non-axial" society—in the generation of far-reaching changes within most of the Eurasian axial civilizations is to be examined.

Seventh is a critical examination of the concept of secondary breakthrough, leading basically to its very abandonment.

Let us now elaborate on these pointsz in somewhat greater detail.

The Process of Decoupling Basic Components of Social Order and the Crystallization of Diverse Institutional Patterns

Jaspers' original model,[1] which to a great extent informed and influenced the discourse of axial civilization through the late 1960s,[2]

[1] Jaspers (1949).
[2] Eisenstadt (1983).

assumed vigorously—if perhaps only implicitly—that there was a certain affinity, conceivably even identity, between the crystallization of axial societies or civilizations and the emergence of a "world" historical Axial Age. While there can be no doubt that in different parts of the world—above all indeed in Eurasia—in the very broad period discussed by Jaspers, several civilizations or societies emerged which evince the major characteristics of "axial" civilizations, nevertheless, the relation between the emergence or crystallization of such civilizations and the emergence of a world historical Axial Age should not be taken for granted, but rather be problematized and questioned. Here of course the case of Islam poses an obvious challenge, but the same is true of Buddhism, and perhaps also of the two religious traditions which developed from an early Israelite monotheism—both Second-Temple rabbinical and sectarian Judaism and Christianity.

Second, a more differentiated analysis of the major characteristics of axial societies or civilizations is called for, especially taking into account the relations between the cosmological visions or premises prevalent within them and the institutional dimensions thereof. The starting point of such an analysis is the recognition of the fact that the institutionalization of axial civilizations is dependent on the development of a certain pattern of elective affinity between the cosmological or ontological and the structural dimensions of axial societies or civilizations. Some such affinity is of course characteristic of all institutional formations and hence the crucial problem in the analysis of axial civilizations is the identification of the specific type of such affinity, of its core, that is characteristic of these civilizations.

The core of such affinity as it develops in axial civilizations is indeed a certain openness in the constitution of these dimensions of social order and of the relations between them. This openness is manifest in the decoupling of the different components or dimensions of social order—the structural and the symbolic—from the frameworks within which they presumably were embedded in earlier, pre-axial periods of their respective societies, or which can be identified in non-axial societies with which they share some basic structural characteristics.[3]

[3] On the concept of decoupling in relation to different evolutionary perspec-

On the structural level, the major process of such "decoupling" has been that of structural differentiation, best manifest in the crystallization of specific, organizationally distinct organizations, collectivities and even roles such as for instance distinct occupational ones; as against their being firmly embedded in different family, kinship or local settings; of "free" non-embedded resources[4] and of the concomitant development of new integrative problems and mechanisms. On the symbolic level, the process of such decoupling is manifest above all in the growing autonomy of the different components of the cosmological visions, and with a growing problematization of the premises of these visions and of social order and reflexivity around these conceptions—i.e., also of potential critical observations and examination of these conceptions and of mundane, especially institutional reality as evaluated and judged by them.

The general tendency to such decoupling and toward the crystallization of affinities between cosmological visions and structural differentiation is not however limited to the axial setting. It is this tendency which lies at the core of "evolutionary" potentialities of human societies. It is to be found in different societies, at different "evolutionary" stages—tribal, archaic, imperial and the like, whatever classifications one uses—and has continually developed also in non-axial civilizations.

The crucial institutional connection between the structural and "cultural" dimensions of such decoupling is the crystallization of distinctive elite functions—those functions or activities which are oriented not only to take care, as it were, of the major organizational problems of social division of labor, such as economic or political problems—but to the constitution of trust, regulation of power and provision of meaning.[5]

While the processes of structural differentiation as they develop in different historical contexts greatly influence the range of the elites that arise in different situations, yet it is the concrete constellations of such elites and above all some of their basic characteristics, especially their respective orientations and relative autonomy, which are

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tives, see: "Social Division of Labor, Construction of Centers and Institutional Dynamics: A Reassessment of the Structural-Evolutionary Perspective", in Eisenstadt (2003a), Ch. 3, 57-74.

[4] On the concept of free resources see in greater detail: Eisenstadt (1963).

[5] Eisenstadt (1995).

analytically distinct from such differentiation—and it is the continual interaction between such structural processes and the different constellation of elites that is of crucial importance in shaping the concrete contours of institutional formations that develop in different historical contexts, in different "internal" and "international" settings. Of special importance in shaping such different institutional patterns is the degree to which the elites are autonomous or embedded in ascriptive units, or act as representatives of such units in the society, as well as the relation between different elites and broader sectors of the respective societies.

In all such "stages" or situations,[6] relatively similar structural formations develop, yet it is only when combined with different constellations of elites as they crystallize in different historical and international settings that they shape the concrete contours of different societies. At the same time in all these cases, in different stages, this crystallization also entails potentialities of breakdown of the institutional patterns, of the development of destructive tendencies.[7]

Thus for instance a series of studies on early state formation in Africa demonstrates that different institutional patterns of chiefdoms or "early" states are closely connected with different combinations of decoupling of structural and cosmological visions and of concomitant growing reflexivity.[8]

In these studies a very sharp distinction is made between societies which developed a high degree of congruence between, on the one hand, different degrees of structural differentiation, of basic organizational—political, kinship, economic, etc.—functions in the regulation of division of labor, and on the other hand the articulation of elite functions, and those in which an incongruence between these two dimensions of social order developed. The crucial difference between such congruent and non-congruent societies, which could be found in a great variety of organizations and regimes including the tribal, city states, patrimonial and imperial frameworks,

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[6] I have shown this in great detail in Eisenstadt (1963).

[7] Eisenstadt (1996a), 31-8.

[8] Eisenstadt, S. N., Abitbol, M. and Chazan, N. "The Origins of the State Reconsidered" in Eisenstadt, Abitbol and Chazan (1988), 1-27; Idems "State Formation in Africa: Conclusions", in Eisenstadt, Abitbol and Chazan (1988), 168-200; and see also for a summary of these societies, a comparative evolutionary perspective, in "Social Division of Labor, Construction of Centers and Institutional Dynamics," op. cit.

was manifest above all in the structure of respective centers and of patterns of collective identities and concomitant patterns of reflexivity which developed within them. In congruent societies, such as for instance in Africa the Asantes, the Zulu and the Congo states, and also the great Egyptian kingdoms, the major centers were ecologically and organizationally, but not symbolically, distinct from the periphery. Such centers crystallized around elites which were enmeshed or embedded in various types of ascriptive units, often broad and reconstructed ones, and who carried cultural orientations characterized by a relatively low degree of tension between the cosmic and the mundane orders. Concomitantly the patterns of collective identity that developed in such societies were characterized by relative homology and a large extent of continuity and overlapping between the constitution of the major collectivities—local and central; territorial, kinship, political or cultural, and by patterns of—often highly sophisticated—reflexivity which did not yet give rise to second order reflexivity, i.e. possible critical examination of the basic cosmological and institutional premises presented in these societies.

As opposed to this, in non-congruent, "tribal" archaic societies or city states, such as in Africa the Ite or Buganda or various Islamic African societies, in the classical city states, or in various imperial and imperial-feudal settings, centers developed which became symbolically, and to some extent also organizationally, distinct from the major frameworks of social division of labor—such as distinctive tribal or territorial centers which were shaped by comparatively more autonomous elites who promulgated orientations in which some degree of tension and dissonance between mundane and transmundane realms existed.

Concomitantly, such societies developed strong tendencies toward the establishment of multiple collectivities constituted by different cultural orientations. These could coalesce in relatively cooperative multifaceted, or contextual patterns.

In all such societies—congruent and non-congruent alike—the concrete contours of different types of centers and collectivities and their dynamics varied considerably according to the structure of the predominant elites and their coalitions, the cultural orientations they bore, and the modes of control they exercised. They also varied, of course, according to different organizational, economic, technological, and geopolitical conditions.

The extent of such congruency or non-congruency entailed dif-

ferent modes of transition or transformation from one type or "stage" of social organization to another. Thus in congruent societies the "transition" from one "stage" of political development to another (e.g., from early state to archaic kingdom or patrimonial, semi-patrimonial, semi-imperial formation) has usually been connected with the reconstitution and widening of the kinship and/or territorial components and ascriptive categories and symbols; with the growing importance of territorial units as opposed to purely kinship ones. It was also characterized by the increasing specialization of elites (who were, however, on the whole, embedded in various—and even very complex and wide-ranging—ascriptive units), and by what may be called the qualitative extension and diversification of basic cosmological conceptions, and the concomitant prevalence of cultural models and conceptions containing relatively low levels of tension between the transcendental and mundane orders.

As against this, in non-congruent societies the "transition" or transformation from one "stage" or institutional type to another usually entailed the crystallization of more differentiated and multiple organizational and symbolic centers and collectivities, in which a variety of relatively "non-embedded" elites are active.

The Specificity of the Axial Complex

The crystallization of the axial civilizations constitutes a rather specific, distinct—indeed probably the most radical until the emergence of modernity—pattern of decoupling of the various structural and cosmological dimensions of social order, and of development of noncongruent societies.

The core of this specific "axial" decoupling has been the combination—to paraphrase Johann Arnason's formulations—of, on the one hand a radical distinction between ultimate and derivative reality (or between transcendental and mundane dimensions, to use a more controversial formulation) …. (connected with an increasing orientation to a specific reality beyond the given one; with new temporal and spatial conceptions);[9] with, on the other hand, a radical problematization of the conceptions of cosmological and social order, and with growing reflexivity and second order thinking, with

[9] See Johann Arnason's contribution to this volume.

the resultant models or order generating new problems (the task of bridging the gap between the postulated levels of reality. Further constitutive factors include the development on the structural level of far-reaching decoupling of many aspects of social structure; and the concomitant development of many free resources which can be organized in many different ways and the carriers of which constitute challenges for the hitherto institutional formations.

The development of, on the one hand, such cosmological conceptions, and on the other hand of decoupling of many aspects of social structure and of free resources took place to some extent at least independently of one another; by the internal momentum of these dimensions of social order—albeit continually reinforcing one another in a variety of ways. Within these societies multiple constellations of power, collective identities and economic formations, each with its own dynamics, developed. But these very dynamics open up the possibilities, indeed the quest, as it were, for some type of reconnection; giving rise to the different modes in which they were interwoven with different axial cosmological orientations, resulting in different institutional patterns.

The most important manifestation of the quest for connection in these societies was the emergence within them of new types of institutional visions, the common institutional core of which has been the broadening, opening up of the range of institutional possibilities and options—be it of conceptions and patterns of political order, of collective identities and hence also the weakening of their perception as being "naturally given" and the growth of the possibility of even principled contestation about them.

All these visions entailed strong tendencies to reconstruct mundane life—social order, personality as well as cultural activities; and the closely related development of conceptions of a world beyond the immediate boundaries of their respective societies—a world open, as it were, to such reconstruction—i.e. of world visions.

The most important among such broader institutional tendencies that developed within all axial civilizations in connection with such visions were strong tendencies to construct a societal center or centers to serve as the major autonomous and symbolically distinct embodiments of the implementation of the transcendental visions; as the major loci of the charismatic dimension of human existence, which attempt to permeate the periphery and restructure it according to their own autonomous visions, conceptions, and rules. Con-

comitantly, in close connection with the institutionalization of axial cultural programs, a strong tendency to define certain collectivities and institutional arenas, as the most appropriate, to be the carriers of the distinct broader transcendental visions, and of new "civilizational"—"religious"—collectivities developed. These were indeed distinct from political and from various "primordial", "ethnic" local or religious collectives, yet they continually impinged on them, interacted with them, and challenged them, generating continual reconstruction of their respective identities. Such processes were effected by the continual interaction between the various autonomous cultural elites, the carriers of solidarity and political elites of the different continually reconstructed "local" and political communities. Concomitantly the constitution of axial civilizations, with their distinctive cultural programs and their continual confrontation between the civilizational and other collectivities and different constellations of power was also connected with the development of new patterns of cultural creativity, closely connected to the patterns of reflexivity that develop in them. On the purely "intellectual" level it was above all theological or philosophical discourse that flourished and became constructed in much more elaborate and formalized ways, organized in different worlds of knowledge in manifold disciplines, and generating continual developments within such frameworks.[10] Within these discourses many problems attendant on the relations between the autonomous developments in different arenas of cultural creativity and some central aspects of the constitution of collectivities and of the relations between them (as for instance concern with the conception of cosmic time and its relationship to the mundane political reality; different conceptions of historia sacra in relation to the flow of mundane time; of sacred space in relation to mundane space) became very central, giving rise to the construction of new types of collective memories and narratives thereof.[11]

The bearers or carriers of these visions constituted a new social element which was of crucial importance, as was already emphasized in the earlier discourse on axial civilizations, in the development of these civilizations, namely a new type of elite—autonomous cultural and religious or secular, carriers of models of cultural and social order which have transformed also the nature of other politi-

[10] Eisenstadt and Friedrich-Silber (1988).
[11] Kedar and Werblowsky (1998).

cal economic elites and of the carriers of the solidarities of different collectivities. These were autonomous—even if in different degrees in different civilizations—intellectuals or Kulturträger such as the ancient Israelite prophets and priests and later on the Jewish sages, the Greek philosophers and sophists, the Chinese literati, the Hindu Brahmins, the Buddhist Sangha, and the Islamic Ulema. Initial small nuclei of such groups of cultural elites or of intellectuals developed the new cosmologies, the new transcendental visions and conceptions, and were of crucial importance in the development of the new "civilizational" institutional formations and the concomitant new patterns of collective identity and world visions in these societies.

These elites as they emerged and succeeded in becoming highly influential or predominant or, in their respective hegemonic societies, as they forged new types of coalitions with other elites, gave rise in all axial societies to the concretization of their respective institutional visions and to the crystallization of distinct institutional patterns. Concomitantly the possibility of institutionalization of such visions has been dependent on the development of certain openness in the social structure, of development of a combination of free resources with that of public opinion which made possible a certain responsiveness from among the broader strata to the visions promulgated by such elites.

All societies that developed in the framework of axial civilizations—full-fledged empires, indeed a very great variety thereof (Chinese, Byzantine or Ottoman); rather fragile kingdoms or tribal federations (e.g., ancient Israel); combinations of tribal federations of city-states (e.g., ancient Greece); the complex decentralized pattern of the Hindu civilization; or the imperial-feudal configurations of Europe—were noncongruent. Each of these types denoted different combinations of structural differentiation and cosmological visions as carried by different elites and the coalitions forged by them.

The concrete contours of these societies, their centers and their dynamics varied considerably according, as indicated above, to the structure of the predominant elites and their coalitions, the cultural orientations they promulgated, and the modes of control they exercised. Thus, for instance, in India a very high degree of autonomy of the religious elites as opposed to a lower one of the political elite appeared. By contrast, there was a relatively small degree of differentiation of political roles of the broader strata—while in Europe a much greater degree of autonomy and differentiation of all the elites

arose. Similarly, within the imperial agrarian regimes, as for instance the comparison between the Byzantine and Chinese Empires clearly indicates, far-reaching differences in the structure of their centers and the mode of their differentiation emerged despite the fact that they shared rather similar degrees (and relatively high ones for historical societies) of structural and organizational differentiation in the economic and social arenas. These centers also varied, of course, according to different organizational, economic, technological, and geopolitical conditions of their respective societies.

Of special interest from the point of view of comparative analysis of different civilizations is the fact that it is possible to identify some similarities between the varieties of elites and coalitions and the dynamics of centers in these (structurally) more developed or differentiated societies and in those identified in the various African cases.[12] Thus, in the noncongruent societies of the Axial Age civilizations, such as India, we find, as in Africa, strong symbolic centers coupled with relatively weak political centers, but with a very sharp articulation of models of cultural order and a strong emphasis on the maintenance of the solidarity of ascriptive units. Many of the Islamic centers developed characteristics similar to those that have been identified in some Islamic states in Africa. Similar parallels can be found in the structure of elites and centers in "tribal" and in highly developed patrimonial congruent societies.

Contrary, however, to the presuppositions of a classical evolutionary approach which have also influenced, even if only implicitly, the major analyses of axial civilizations, the different dimensions of structural differentiation and disembedment of cultural orientations and the growing problematization of the perceptions of the sources/dimensions of human existence do not always mesh in a clearly predetermined way. At most one can observe the development of a certain affinity with respect to the range of the institutional choices that are generated by the openness of both the cosmological visions as well as of structural differentiation and the concomitant development of free resources.

Indeed with respect to all these dimensions of the social order—be they political formations of discourse, constitution of collective identity or economic formations—we can, in all axial civilizations

[12] Eisenstadt, Abitbol and Chazan, "The Origins of the State Reconsidered", in Eisenstadt, Abitbol and Chazan (1988).

or societies, observe a significant autonomy which was to some extent independent of, even if closely interwoven with, the distinctive axial cosmologies.

Here the comparison of relatively similar power-structures—be they patrimonial, feudal, imperial or city state—in non-axial and axial civilizations is indeed of special interest. Many of the concrete institutional patterns that developed in such societies could be very similar to those that develop in "non-axial" ones, often attesting indeed to the "persistence" of non-axial components within axial civilizations. But the crucial distinct axial component was the possibility of dissent and potential heterodoxy which is endemic in axial civilizations; and of changes generated by the connection of such potentialities with contestations over power, resources and ideological contours. Of special importance in this context is that these heterodoxies or sectarian activities are among the most important carriers of the broader, often universalistic, transformational axial cosmological and institutional visions. Accordingly the concrete institutional constellations not only varied among different axial civilizations; they also could change greatly within them, giving rise to a much greater range of variability and changeability than in non-axial ones.[13]

Thus, with respect to the constitution of different patterns of collective identity, the very differentiation and distinction between different collectivities generated in all of them the possibility of crystallization of a multiplicity of combinations of primordial, civil and sacred themes on the local, regional and central levels, of continual reconstructions of such themes in relation to the sacral civilizational ones; and to the concomitant potentiality of continual confrontation between them. No single locus, not even the centers of the most centralized European empires, could effectively monopolize the representation of all these themes on different levels of social organization, and different collectivities—"ethnic", political, civic and religious—with relatively high levels of self-consciousness, each with different conceptions of time and space in relation to other collectivities.

Thus indeed the relations between different collectivities and political and economic formations, the struggles and contestations between their respective carriers—constituted a continual aspect of

[13] See Johann Arnason's contribution to this volume.

the dynamics of axial civilizations, giving rise to the concretization of different institutional patterns, to different—as it were—institutional "choices". The concretization of any such choice, which could be long-lasting, as in the case of China or, as in other cases, of a much shorter span, was contingent on a variety of historical forces which certainly were not fore-ordained in either the cosmological vision or the "original" ecological setting; rather they were greatly dependent on political ecological settings and historical contingencies.

Of special importance from the point of view of the openness of the relation between "cosmological" visions, ecological settings and institutional formations is the case of what Parsons called seedbed societies—early ancient Greece and ancient Israel are prime illustrations.[14] The central core characteristics of these seedbed societies has been the very discrepancy between the potential institutional range of their basic visions and the concrete possibilities of their institutionalization—giving rise to a situation in which many of the institutional potentialities of their visions were in a sense "stored", to be transmitted as components of institutional settings and dynamics of other civilizations.

Such continual potential reconstitution of different combinations between cosmological visions and structural dynamics of different structures of power and of collective identities in axial civilizations was reinforced by the fact that with the institutionalization of axial civilizations, a new type of inter-societal and inter-civilizational world history emerged. To be sure, political and economic interconnections existed, as has been indicated in the above, between different societies throughout human history. Some conceptions of a universal or world kingdom emerged in many pre-axial civilizations, like that of Genghis Khan, and many cultural interconnections developed between them, but only with the institutionalization of axial civilizations did a more distinctive ideological and reflexive mode of expansion develop.

Within all these civilizations a certain propensity to expansion developed in close connection with the tendencies to reconstruct the world in which ideological and religious impulses were combined with political and to some extent economic ones. Although often

[14] Parsons (1977), 13.

radically divergent in terms of their concrete institutionalization, the political formations which developed in these civilizations—which can be seen as "ecumenical"—comprised representations and ideologies of quasi-global empire, and some, at moments in their history, even the facts of such empire. This mode of expansion also gave rise to an awareness of creating possible "world histories" encompassing many different societies. The impact of "world histories", of different conceptions of world histories, on the constitution and institutional formation of collective consciousness and identities of the different societies became more clearly visible.

The recognition of the multiplicity of different modes of decoupling of the different dimensions of social order—of aspects of social division of labor and elite functions, and of constellation of the different relations between them in specific institutional patterns—indicates the necessity of more differentiated analysis of non-axial and axial civilizations alike, and of the relations between them.

In large parts of axial literature, pre-axial civilizations were presented as a sort of residual category, as failed axial ones or as their precursors—and their crystallization, self perpetuation as well as changeability, dynamics and tendencies to expansion were not on the whole analysed on their own terms, thus losing very important dimensions of world history or histories and of the place of these civilizations in them. This is especially true of the analysis of these distinct ontological visions and patterns of reflexivity that developed within the non-axial civilizations.

Yet in these cases, as for instance Peter Machinist[15] and Michalowski have shown with respect to Assyria and Babylonia, the cultural orientations which were prevalent within them were not just precursors of, or failed, axial orientations. The specific cosmological conception, which can be designated as proto-axial orientations and patterns of reflexivity which developed in these civilizations, which were not simply unable, as it were, to develop into axial ones but which evinced a continuity and dynamics of their own. These orientations and their bearers were very influential in shaping institutional and intellectual spaces in which distinct patterns of intellectual and cultural creativity and of reflexivity developed.

Moreover within non-axial cosmologies, and indeed also axial ones,

[15] Machinist (2001), 1-54.

it was possible to develop different combinations of the different components of such visions. Of special interest from this point of view has been—as was emphasized at the conference—the Achaemenid case, where very strong universalistic orientations developed, albeit without the attempt to reshape the social and political order according to some transcendental visions.

Japan is probably the most vivid illustration of the development in a society of relatively high levels of structural differentiation with "non-axial" cosmological orientation, but in which this very combination, together with the continual encounter with great axial civilizations (the Confucian or Buddhist one) has given rise to a highly developed "non-axial" pattern of reflexivity.[16]

Indeed in all these civilizations different combinations of structural differentiation, cosmological visions and elite functions developed. Each carried different dynamics of its own. These were of great importance on the world historical scene and continued to be of great importance even once different axial civilizations took over the playground, as it were. Even in the new axial settings, such non-axial orientations and their carriers constituted important components of the cultural and institutional dynamics; creating autonomous spaces which could indeed be very influential, albeit of course to different degrees in different civilizations within the framework of the new axial frameworks, often persisting, as has been for instance the case in Egypt, through changes in the dominant axial civilizations.

Such a more differentiated approach to the analysis of basic cosmologies necessitates also transcending the distinction between "thisworldly" and "otherworldly" orientations rooted in the Weberian program—a distinction which constituted a basic component of the studies of axial civilizations in the sixties.[17]

Thus, as for instance Raaflaub has shown, the Greek-Hellenist-Roman complex constitutes a very distinctive case very different from the other major "this-worldly" civilization—the Chinese. The critical difference between these two civilizations lies in the relative weakness in the first case of any transcendental orientation as a guiding principle of the constitution of the social and political or-

[16] Eisenstadt (1994), 63-95.
[17] Eisenstadt (1985), 168-186 reprinted in Eisenstadt (2003a), Ch. 11, 281-306.

der, while at the same time a very strong reflexive and critical discourse about the social and political order in many ways unequalled—at least until modern times—in any other axial civilization developed. It is this difference which is probably of great importance in explaining at least some of the distinctive characteristics of the Hellenistic and Roman civilizations, especially the specific tendencies to Imperial expansion that developed in them—on which Arnaldo Momigliano based his assertion that polytheism is good and monotheism bad for empire building.[18]

In all these cases, interrelations and contacts among different axial civilizations and among them and non-axial ones, each with its own claims for some universality, constituted an aspect of the dynamics of these civilizations. This aspect has been rather neglected in many analyses, probably due to the tendency to conflate axial civilizations with an Axial Age.

Such contacts were not only important transmitters of different central tropes giving rise to different patterns of syncretization of cultural tropes, but it is also relevant that they could give rise to new—as was the case in both the Achemenid and Hellenistic—both pre-axial and axial civilizations—as well as the several Southeast and East Asian civilizations, and of course Islam.

All these developments, as in the case of the Parsonian "seedbed" civilizations, open new vistas in the analysis of the interrelations and influences between different civilizations, indicating that such influences need not be limited to only concretized settings impinging on the systemic boundaries of the respective institutional formations, but rather in a multiplicity of ways and channels cutting across such borders.

The Constitution of Collective Identities and Constellations of Power in Axial Age Civilizations: General Considerations and Selective Illustrations

The potentiality of dissent, with some impact on the dynamics of their respective societies, is indeed inherent to axial civilizations, but, as indicated above, the concretization of such possibilities of reconstruction of patterns of collective identities and constellations of power

[18] Momigliano (1987), Ch. 9, "The Disadvantages of Monotheism for a Universal State", 142-58.

varies greatly among them. We shall illustrate the development of such possibilities with respect to different patterns of collective identities as they have crystallized in different axial civilizations.

The tendencies to such reconstruction developed in several, often overlapping but never fully identical directions. One such direction was generated by the development, which was inherent in the civilization of heterodoxies and sectarian tendencies. This development took place for instance in the case of the crystallization of Jewish identity in the Second Temple and in exilic times,[19] in the case of the Iconoclasts in the Byzantine Empire,[20] and in the great divide between Sunni and Shiite Islam,[21] and in Protestantism in Europe.[22] These developments generate strong tendencies to redefine many of the components of the identities of their respective collectivities—and even to give rise to construction of new, distinct ones—civilizational, political and ethnic alike.

The other such direction of the reconstruction of collective identities and constellations of power that was inherent to axial civilizations was that generated by the development of autonomous political actors who attempted to redefine the scope of political communities in relation to the broader ecumenical ones. The third such direction, often connected with the former yet in principle distinct from it, was that to "vernacularization" which we shall discuss in somewhat greater detail below.

The directions of change and the concomitant construction of constellations of power, of political regimes and of different collectivities and collective identities; and of different relations among them—especially among the different "local", "civic", ethnic and the civilizational sacral ones with their strong universalistic orientations, and the concomitant modes of reconstruction of primordiality developed in different ways in different axial civilizations. These differences were shaped first by the basic premises and cultural programs of these civilizations, especially by the ways in which the relations

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[19] Cohen (1990), 204-24; Eisenstadt and Giesen (1995), 72-102.

[20] Eisenstadt (1995), 280-306; Eisenstadt (2003b), Ch. 24, "Origins of the West. The Origins of the West in Recent Macrosociological Theory. The Protestant Ethic Reconsidered", 577-612.

[21] Eisenstadt (1998), 15-33.

[22] Eisenstadt (1968), 3-45; Eisenstadt (2003b), Ch. 24, "Origins of the West. The Origins of the West in Recent Macrosociological Theory. The Protestant Ethic Reconsidered", 577-612.

between on the one hand attributes of the sacral, cosmic and social order and on the other hand the basic attributes of the primordial ascriptive collectivities were perceived in the distinct cultural programs that crystallized within them by the hegemonic elite in different axial civilizations. Here three typical constellations can be distinguished. One most fully illustrated by the Jewish case and in a different way in the Hindu one has been characterized by the vesting of the sacral attributes in various ascriptive collectivities. The second one, most fully illustrated in ideal typical way in Islam and Buddhism, occurs when there is a total disjunction between the two. The third possibility, most fully developed in different parts of Christianity and in different ways in the Confucian societies, arises when these attributes of the "universalistic" and the primordial collectivities are conceived as mutually relevant and each serves as a referent of the other or a condition of being a member of the other without being totally embedded in it. Such a partial connection usually means that the attributes of the various ascriptive collectivities are seen as one component of the attributes of sacrality, and/or conversely, that the attributes of sacrality constitute one of the attributes of such collectivities.

Second, these directions of change were greatly influenced by the historical experiences and political ecological settings of these civilizations, especially if they were, as was the case in Europe and India, politically decentralized or centralized as was the case in China, the Byzantine Empire and especially the later more centralized Islamic Empires—the Ottoman and Safavid ones.

Given the constraints of space, we shall limit ourselves mainly to a more detailed comparative analysis of two major decentralized axial civilizations, in Christian Europe and India, from the Middle Ages, up to the early modern period. In these civilizations different patterns of pluralism, dispersed centers and collectivities crystallized. They were, nevertheless, bound together by orientations to the common civilizational framework.[23]

In India and Europe, major collectivities and central institutions were continually constituted in a variety of ways. These all entailed different combinations of the basic terms and codes of collective identity: primordial attachments and traditions, and transcendental

[23] Eisenstadt (1987).

as well as traditional civic criteria. The continuous restructuring of centers and collectivities revolved in Europe around the oscillation and tension between the sacred, primordial, and civil dimensions. While, for instance, many collectivities were defined and legitimated mainly in primordial terms, they also attempted to arrogate sacred and civil symbols of legitimation and they all contained strong territorial and political orientations, and such orientations were also shared by many of the sectarian and heterodox groups that developed in Europe.

The relations between the broader civilizational and "local" primordial collectivities developed in a different way in India, in close relation to its distinct cultural program. The major difference was the weaker emphasis among them of territorial and political orientations. This was closely related to the fact that the political arena, the arena of rulership, did not constitute in "historical" India—as it did in monotheistic civilizations or in Confucianism—a major arena of the implementation of the transcendental visions predominant in this civilization. The conception of Indian civilization as closely related to these visions and as promulgated by its bearers, did not contain, as in Europe, or as in the other monotheistic religions (Judaism and Islam) and even more so in China, a strong political component. Only recently have strong tendencies developed among some political groups to promulgate a specific Hindu political identity and to define the Indian civilization in political terms.

Closely related to the patterns of collective identity were those of the political dynamics that prevailed in India. The conceptions of the political arena and of legitimation of rulers that crystallized in India were closely related to the theory and practice of sovereignty that developed in India. These are of great importance for the understanding of Indian political dynamics, especially of the pragmatic attitudes and accommodative stances which developed within them. As Wink,[24] the Rudolphs[25] and others have shown, these conceptions emphasized the multiple rights—very often defined in terms of various duties—of different groups and sectors of society rather than a unitary, quasi-ontological conception—real or ideal—

[24] Wink (1986).

[25] Rudolph and Rudolph (1987); Rudolph and Rudolph (1984), Rudolph, (1984) and Rudolph (1963), 14-31.

of "the state" or of "society"—giving rise to fractured sovereignty. The organizational dimension of this picture is, on the face of it, of course, similar to the one that prevailed in Europe throughout the middle ages and the early-modern period. The crucial difference is, however, that in Europe the ideal of political unification—symbolized in the ideal of re-establishment of the Holy Roman Empire, however fragile its institutional bases were—constituted an ideal model. In India—at least until recently—such an ideal was at best very weak. While the "fractured" sovereignty that developed in India was often combined with a tendency to far-reaching civilizational expansion, especially on the subcontinent, this tendency did not give rise—as in the monotheistic civilizations or in China—to the construction of autonomous, often imperial, political centers, distinct from the periphery, attempting to impose on the periphery through distinct political activities and organizations, political religious conceptions, a distinct civilizational vision. In India—despite its "empires"—there never developed a conception of statehood as a distinct, absolutized ontological entity, and no absolutist conceptions of politics developed. Although India knew states of different scope, from semi-imperial centers to small patrimonial ones, the overall Indian cultural tradition was never identified with any of them. Indian polities were characterized by predominantly personalistic and patrimonial characteristics, the rulers relying mostly on the support above all of the various particularistic communities and to some extent, especially in some of the later developments, as among the Mauryas, on personal loyalty and ties for recruitment of personnel and for contacts with different sectors of society.

Parallelly, in contrast to Europe, the reconstruction of the major collectivities and the development of new types of social organization in India was not, on the whole, connected with radical shifts in the modes of their legitimation, or with principled struggles concerning the bases of such legitimation. The bases of legitimation of the various mundane activities—political, economic, and the like—defined in terms of their respective dharmas and auspicious performances, were relatively continuous throughout Indian history, even if their concrete applications were often rather flexible.

Concomitantly the basic definitions of ontological reality prevalent in India did not generate strong alternative conceptions of political order. The sectarian movements which developed in the framework of Indian civilization were not connected with reconstruc-

tion of the political realm to the extent that they were in Europe, and the process of vernacularization developed in India in a different direction than in Europe.[26] Consequently, the principled, ideological reconstruction of the political (or economic) arena according to basic transcendental orientations did not constitute, as it did in Europe, a major focus of the movements of protest or the numerous sects that developed in India—Bhakti, Jain, Buddhism and other movements within Hinduism—even if in many cases segments of such movements participated in the changes of political regimes and the wars between different kings and princes.

Many of the visions promulgated by these movements emphasized equality, but it was above all equality in the cultural or religious arena, with respect to access to worship, and to some extent in the definition of membership in the political community. Such egalitarian orientations promulgated in some of the heterodox movements, which sometimes became connected with rebellions and political struggle, were not characterized by the strong articulation of new political goals, nor were they linked with many attempts to restructure the basic premises of political regimes. Only in some popular uprising against alien or "bad" rulers did such goals crystallize for a short while.

These movements, oriented toward the reconstruction of ascriptive civilizational symbols and collectivities, could become connected with the extension of the borders of political communities or with the establishment of new ones, with changes of dynasties, but rarely with the reconstruction of the premises of the political centers. Buddhism did give rise to such new premises, but they became fully institutionalized only outside India, in the new Theravada Buddhist polities of southeast Asia and in Mahayana Tibet.

Thus, throughout its long history India witnessed far-reaching changes in its political and economic organizations, in technology, and in levels of social differentiation—as well as redefinition of the boundaries of political units, some restructuring of the economic sphere, and changes in social and economic policies, often effected by coalitions of entrepreneurs rooted in different caste networks—economic groups such as merchants. But except for the ultimately

[26] Eisenstadt and Hartman (1997), 27-55; Dumont (1970); Heesterman (1985); Goodwin-Raheja (1988), 17:497-522.

unsuccessful attempt of Asoka, most of these processes of movements of change did not succeed in—and possibly did not even aim at—restructuring the basic premises of the political arena, or the basic center-periphery relations.[27]

These characteristics of the major religious and popular movements, their relations to the political centers, and the institutional and symbolic characteristics of the political arena explain one of the most interesting aspects, from a comparative point of view, of Indian medieval and early-modern history, namely the absence of wars of religion, of the type which characterized Christianity and Islam—that is, wars in which political goals were closely interwoven with, and legitimized by, attempts to impose by political fiat or conversion a religion on the community or on the political realm. Even if the recent emphasis on the relatively peaceful symbiosis of Muslim and Hindu groups in the Mughal realm is probably exaggerated, and numerous points of conflict between them develop, they did not usually acquire the totalistic confrontational quality that was characteristic of the situation within and among monotheistic religions. The often very intensive religious conflicts between Muslims and Hindus which developed in the Mughal Empire under Muslim rule did not develop in the direction of a forced conversion or of a total confrontation with the Hindu religion or religions.

Different patterns of relations between primordial and sacral themes crystallized, albeit in different modes, in more centralized political systems which developed in axial civilizations—in the different empires that developed in different axial civilizations—such as the Roman, Chinese and Byzantine ones, and were in all of them strongly influenced by the respective cultural programs of these civilizations and their distinct historical experience.

In these empires power was much more concentrated and centralized. Accordingly it developed, in contrast to the situation in India or Europe, a relatively strong tendency to the regulation by the center of the combination of different collective identities that they spawned. Such regulation did not usually entail—with the partial, but indeed only partial—exception of the Byzantine Empire, and of other Christian kingdoms (such as the Ethiopian one or the Armenian one), the appropriation by the center of all the major (sacral, civil and

[27] Lal (1988).

primordial) themes on the macro-societal level—and certainly not on the local ones. Different "ethnic" civil, local and even religious communities were allowed to maintain and develop quite far-reaching distinctiveness and autonomy and self-consciousness which was indeed enhanced by the encounter with the broader civilizational ones insofar as their basic tenets did not, as in the Jewish case, in its relations to the Hellenistic and Roman Empire, negate the basic legitimacy of the imperial order.[28]

But the ways in which these relations between the centralistic tendencies, as well as between them and local autonomous formations, differed between these Empires, were very much in line with the basic cultural programs, the social imaginary, promulgated within them and their distinct historical experience (the detailed analysis of which would be beyond the scope of this paper).[29]

Comparative Note: The Constitution of Collective Identity in a Non-Axial Civilization: Japan through the Tokugawa Period

Japan provides a most instructive illustration of the crystallization and continuity of a distinct type of collective identity in a non-axial civilization, which was successful in maintaining its distinct collective identity, in continual confrontation with two axial civilizations, Confucian and Buddhist, and later with the Western world's ideological, military, political and economic systems.[30]

Early in Japanese history a very distinct type of collective consciousness or identity—a political and ethnic identity or collective consciousness, couched in sacral-primordial terms developed.[31] Unlike the collective identities that developed in Europe—or China, Korea or Vietnam—Japan's collective consciousness did not develop within the framework of a universalistic civilization with strong transcendental orientations. Japan, to be sure, was greatly influenced by its encounter with Chinese Confucianism and Buddhist civilization. However, in contrast to what happened in the realm of the axial civilizations, Japan resolved its confrontation with universalistic ide-

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[28] Cohen (1990), 204-24; Eisenstadt and Giesen (1995), 72-102.

[29] Eisenstadt (1986), 297-320.

[30] Eisenstadt (1994), 63-95.

[31] Kitagawa (1987); Rozman (1991); Waida (1980); Werblowsky, (1976) and Blacker (1995).

ologies by apparently denying them rather than attempting to relate them to its primordial symbols.

This collective consciousness was constructed around the idea of a sacred liturgical community and the uniqueness of the Japanese collectivity or nation. This conception of a divine nation, or—to follow Werblowsky's felicitous expression—of sacred particularity, did not, however, entail its being uniquely "chosen" in terms of a transcendental and universalistic mission. It did not entail the conception of responsibility to God to pursue such a mission.

Japan's conception of sacred particularity usually held its own when confronted with successive waves of universalistic ideologies (Buddhist, Confucian, then liberal, constitutional, progressivist, or Marxist), all of which seemingly called for a redefinition of the symbols of collective identity. With the exception of small groups of intellectuals, redefinition in a universalist direction did not take hold in the Japanese collective consciousness. Instead the premises of these religions or ideologies were continually reconstructed in Japan and combined with sacral, primordial, and natural terms—indeed very often under the impact of the encounter with Buddhism and Confucianism, and later with Western civilizations.

Reformulations of the Japanese collective identity entailed very intensive orientations to "others"—China, Asia, the West—and an awareness of other encompassing civilizations claiming some universal validity. But they did not entail the participation of the Japanese collectivity in such civilizations and its reconstruction according to these universalistic premises. The reformulations did not generate the perception of Japan becoming a part, whether central or peripheral, of such a universalistic system. In extreme form they asserted that the Japanese collectivity embodied the pristine values enunciated by the other civilizations and wrongfully appropriated by them. This yielded a very strong tendency—which played an important role in Japanese society from the Meiji era up to the contemporary period—to define the Japanese collectivity in terms of "incomparability" very often couched in racial, genetic terms, or in terms of some special spirituality. Such definitions of the Japanese collectivity made it impossible to become Japanese by conversion. The Buddhist sects or Confucian schools—the most natural channels of conversion—could not perform this function in Japan.

The ability of Japanese elites to promulgate and "reproduce" such extreme denial of the universalistic components of the Axial Age

civilizations which were continually impinging on them, was closely related to some of the basic characteristics of their elites. The most important of these, from the point of view of our analysis, is that these elites were not strong and autonomous. The common characteristic of these elites and their major coalitions was their embedding in groups and settings (contexts) that were mainly defined in primordial, ascriptive, sacral, and often hierarchical terms, and much less in terms of specialized functions or of universalistic criteria of social attributes.[32]

True, many cultural actors—priests, monks, scholars, and the like—participated in such coalitions. But with very few exceptions, their participation was based on primordial and social attributes and on criteria of achievement and social obligations issuing from the different particular contexts shaping these coalitions, and not on any autonomous criteria rooted in or related to the arenas in which they were active. These arenas—cultural, religious or literary—were themselves ultimately defined in primordial-sacral terms, notwithstanding the fact that many specialized activities developed within them.

Such construction of the overall Japanese collective identity in particularistic primordial sacral terms allowed, especially in the premodern period, the development of a wide scope for local and regional identities defined mostly, also in particular, in primordial terms with lesser emphasis on sacral components—the latter being mostly vested in the center, and thus enabling a relatively high degree of porousness of these respective boundaries.

This porousness was already weakened to some extent in the Tokugawa period when the first attempts to impose such rigid boundaries on the overall Japanese collectivity emerged, to become even more thoroughgoing with the crystallization of the Meiji state.[33]

Reconstruction of Primordiality in Axial Civilizations: The Process of Vernacularization

One of the most interesting cases of the continual reconstitution of collective identity and power structure attendant on the opening up

[32] Eisenstadt (1996b).
[33] Howell (1988), 127:3, 105-132.

of new spaces was the development, in the frameworks of axial civilizations, in conjunction with political and economic developments within them, of processes of "vernacularization."[34]

"Vernacularization" signifies first of all the challenge to and eventually supersession of an ecumenical language through the upgrading of a local idiom. Such vernacularization of ecumenical worlds occurred most visibly and richly, and perhaps earliest, in Southern Asia. Such as, for instance, exemplary here (with dates necessarily simplifying complex matters) are Kannada and Telugu (ninth-eleventh centuries) in South India, Sinhala (tenth-eleventh centuries) in Sri Lanka, Javanese (tenth century) and Tai (fourteenth-fifteenth century) in Southeast Asia. In all these cases, courtly elites appropriated literary idioms and models from cosmopolitan Sanskrit for the creation of literatures in regional languages while visibly reordering their notions of political space and their practices of governance.

Vernacularization entails, on the most general level, a different way of being articulated in language from that made available in the great ecumenes of the axial civilizations. It entails a reconstitution of the relations and tensions between "primordial" and broader civilizational ecumene from the pattern of such relations that developed in the "classic" ecumene of Axial Age. It entails the confrontation of local languages with historically determinate and self-consciously theorized ecumenical forms—Sanskrit, Latin, Greek, Persian and, in a more complex way, Chinese—and the linkage of the new vernacular cultures thereby created with some political principles, the precise contours of which, it is crucial to realize, cannot be determined a priori. The bearers of vernacularization are cultural and political elites typically associated with the courtly sphere. "Vernacular" intellectuals define at once a literary and a political culture in conscious opposition to the larger ecumene; they speak locally and are fully aware that they are doing so, creating texts in local languages, languages that do not travel well, in conscious opposition to the ecumenical, well-traveled languages that had previously characterized text-production.

The choice to become vernacular usually entails far-reaching changes in various domains of life. This vernacularization entailed

[34] Eisenstadt, Pollock, Schluchter and Wittrock (1999).

redefinition of collective identities, and a concomitant transformation of political order; and in close relation to their changing modes of political self-understanding; of the production of territoriality; of the creation of new social collectivities.

In the political sphere, for example, the critical transformation appears to be a contraction of the domain of governance. This comprises a vision of a smaller world within which power is to be consolidated and exercised, a vision in some cases given shape by a new territorialization of political space and a new construction of the community that inhabits it. In the sphere of literary culture, especially the creation of new belletristic texts and their grammatical and philological appurtenances, we can perceive the vernacular choice with special clarity.

Vernacularization also usually entails some claims to a spatial reorganization of the relevant frame of reference for the cultural practices. Previously undefined spaces are to some extent turned into place specific to the newly crystallizing literary-language area. It entails a new component of "placed" culture conceived of itself in relation to the transareal culture of the cosmopolitan epoch, and to yet smaller zones incorporated in the new vernacular region.

The vernacularization of literary language (and, possibly, of polity) is also connected with different forms of collective identity-formation, with the construction of new genealogies, if any, and entailed a new relation between local identities in relationship to earlier cosmopolitan or universalistic visions, as well as between such conceptions and notions of cultural or political authority, although here also a very great variation developed between different societies.

Such tendencies to vernacularization with all their institutional implications, especially the growing emphasis on some combination between territoriality and primordial dimensions of collective identity and the concomitant appropriation by them of some of the orientations to universal or "ecumenic" hegemony, developed in most axial civilizations. But such parallel development did not necessarily mean, contrary to the assumption of many contemporary studies, that the pattern of relations between territorial boundaries and other components of collective identity (especially the primordial ones) and their relations to the centers of societies pointed in the same direction as in Europe. Indeed these tendencies developed in different axial civilizations very much in line with some of the differences between them briefly outlined above.

Thus, in Europe, there was a slow but constant growth in the use of vernacular languages and a concomitant shift from imperial types of political order towards more nationally conceived ones. Indologists report a similar growth, in this instance complementing rather than replacing the sacred languages of Sanskrit and Pali in various parts of the Indian subcontinent, but there was no emergence of clearly defined, territorially bound political orders, at least not in the European sense of the term. In East Asia, on the other hand, both classical Chinese language and the imperial order (and the partial parallels in Japan) were maintained in spite of great turmoils during these centuries—thus minimizing the possibility of development of autonomous vernacular traditions and cultural creativities as bases of new territorial collectivities.

Concluding Observations: The Axial Component or Dimension in World History

The preceding discussion provides a number of important justifications for a much more differentiated analysis of the relation between non-axial civilizations, axial civilizations and world history.

While earlier analyses of axial civilizations entailed a very strong—even if implicit—evolutionary assumption of potentially universal stages of world history, more recent discussions call for a much more diversified and contextualized approach. Instead of assuming that the crystallization of axial civilizations entailed the emergence of a distinct, distinctive, more or less uniform Axial Age in world history, it is better to speak of an axial complex: in the sense of a whole spectrum of patterns of decoupling social structural and ontological dimensions of social order, thus opening the way to their autonomous developments, greatly dependent on a variety of factors to be shortly enumerated, and to their recombinations in different non-congruent institutional patterns within the societies in question.

The preceding discussion of the development of multiple institutional modes of axial civilizations indicates that the different axial cultural programs and institutional patterns did not constitute natural evolutionary potentialities of these societies—nor, a fortiori, of all human societies—even if they were greatly influenced by the patterns of decoupling between different dimensions of social order that developed in these societies. Rather, such programs and patterns, as is indeed also the case with other institutional formations in the

history of mankind, were shaped by continuous interaction among several factors, the most general being the various constellations of power, i.e. different modes of elite contestation and co-optation in different political systems and different cosmological conceptions and political ideologies. It was the different constellations of these factors that influenced the nature of the emerging different multiple axialities—as borne by various political activists, intellectuals, in conjunction above all with social movements and sectarian heterodoxies.

Or, in greater detail, these programs were shaped first by basic premises of cosmic and social order, the basic "cosmologies" that were prevalent in these societies in their "orthodox" and "heterodox" formulations alike as they crystallized in these societies throughout their histories. A second shaping factor was the pattern of decoupling between the different dimensions of the social order and of institutional formations that developed within these civilizations through their historical experience.

The third set of factors shaping such programs and historical experiences was the internal tensions, dynamics and contradictions that developed in these societies in conjunction with the structural-demographic, economic, and political changes attendant on the institutionalization of axial frameworks, and between these processes and the basic axial premises of these civilizations.

Fourth was the encounter with other societies or civilizations. The different—continually changing—axial programs were shaped by the encounter and continual interaction between the processes mentioned above, and the ways in which the different societies and civilizations were incorporated into the international frameworks which developed attendant on the processes of their expansion themselves concomitant on the institutionalization of the different axial programs, and the ways in which they were placed or were able to place themselves, in these systems, to insert or become inserted in these frameworks.

Last, such institutional contours were rooted in the continual confrontations between on the one hand different interpretations of the basic premises of axiality as promulgated by different centers and elites, and on the other hand the concrete developments, conflicts, and displacements that accompanied the institutionalization of these premises. These confrontations activated the consciousness of the contradictions inherent in the axial cultural programs and the po-

tentialities generated by its openness and reflexivity; and gave rise to the continual reinterpretation by different social actors of the major themes of the axial programs, of the basic premises of their civilizational visions, and their grand narratives.

The axial syndrome does indeed constitute a very crucial component in the development of human societies, which may develop in different ways in different contexts. It could become connected in different ways with other axial as well as non-axial societies or civilizations. But these non-axial civilizations were not just precursors of the axial ones or failed axial ones. Each of these civilizations developed a different dynamics of its own. These were of great importance on the world historical scene and continued to be of great importance even after axial civilizations, as it were, took over.

All these considerations further problematized the conflation between the crystallization of axial civilizations and "Axial Age" or "Ages." They clearly indicate that the extent to which the developments in different parts of the world converge indeed into a "global" or "semi-global" Axial Age has to be put as a question, as a problem to be investigated—and not taken for granted. While there is no doubt that the institutionalization of different axial civilizations, with their tendency to universalistic orientations with strong transcendental emphases and tendencies to reconstruct societies, created new visions of possible world histories, it does not mean that any one such vision became hegemonic—or that it necessarily excluded other visions. Indeed these considerations point to continual contestations among such different visions and the civilizations in which they were initiated; and to the fact that not all societies which were incorporated into the frameworks of the civilizations, guided by such visions, were indeed "taken over" by them. Rather they were able to develop their own spaces with distinctive dynamics. They could also, as the case of Japan attests, create their own very important niches in international frameworks dominated by axial civilizations.

Following these considerations, the relation of axial civilizations to modernity should be reconsidered on at least two levels. On the first level it should be stressed that the emergence of modernity should not be seen as a natural result or outgrowth of the potentialities inherent especially in the European axiality, but following Weber's general insights into comparative history as contingent on the combination of various "accidental" historical developments. Or, to repeat our earlier statements, they were shaped—as indicated in

greater detail earlier—by the continuous interaction among several factors, the most general being the various constellations of power, i.e. different modes of elite contestation and co-optation in different political systems and different cosmological conceptions and political ideologies. Different constellations of these factors influenced the nature of the emerging different multiple axialities.

The second level of such reconsideration is the recognition of the close affinity between the analysis of "multiple axialities" and that of "multiple modernities".[35] Here of special importance is indeed the distinction between primary and "later" modernities—entailing a certain reading of Weber, distinct from the ways in which the Protestant Ethic thesis has been interpreted in the recent decades and which emphasized Weber's concern to explain the nature of the specific mode of rationalization that developed in the West—a problem succinctly analyzed by W. Schluchter.[36]

In the fifties and sixties this concern gave rise also to exploration of the possibility of finding some equivalents of the Protestant Ethic in other civilizations—one of the best, and first, of which was Robert N. Bellah's *Tokugawa Religion*[37]—assuming, even if often only implicitly, that it is only insofar as such equivalents of the Protestant Ethic do develop in these civilizations they will really become modern. If one emphasizes only this reading of Weber it is seemingly irrelevant to the contemporary world of multiple modernities. There is however another reading of Weber's work, which is indeed highly relevant for the understanding of multiple modernities. This is the reading of the "Gesammelte Aufsätze für Religionssoziologie" as studies of the internal dynamics of the various great civilizations, in their own terms, in terms of their distinctive rationalities, with a special emphasis on the role of heterodoxies and sectarian movements on these dynamics. Such a reading of Weber is reinforced by the fact that these "new" multiple modernities are as it were "late" modernities. Weber focused his analysis on the development of the first—Western, European—modernity and did not assume that the later ones would necessarily develop under the same conditions. Accordingly reading Weber leads almost naturally to the question of how these dynamics, the specific historical experience of these

[35] Eisenstadt (2000a) 129:1, 1-29; Roniger and Waisman (2002).
[36] Schluchter (1979); Schluchter (1981) and Schluchter (1989).
[37] Bellah (1957).

civilizations, may influence—certainly not determine—some of the distinct characteristics of the modernities that develop in these civilizations[38]—thus bringing us indeed to the analysis of multiple modernities.

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